The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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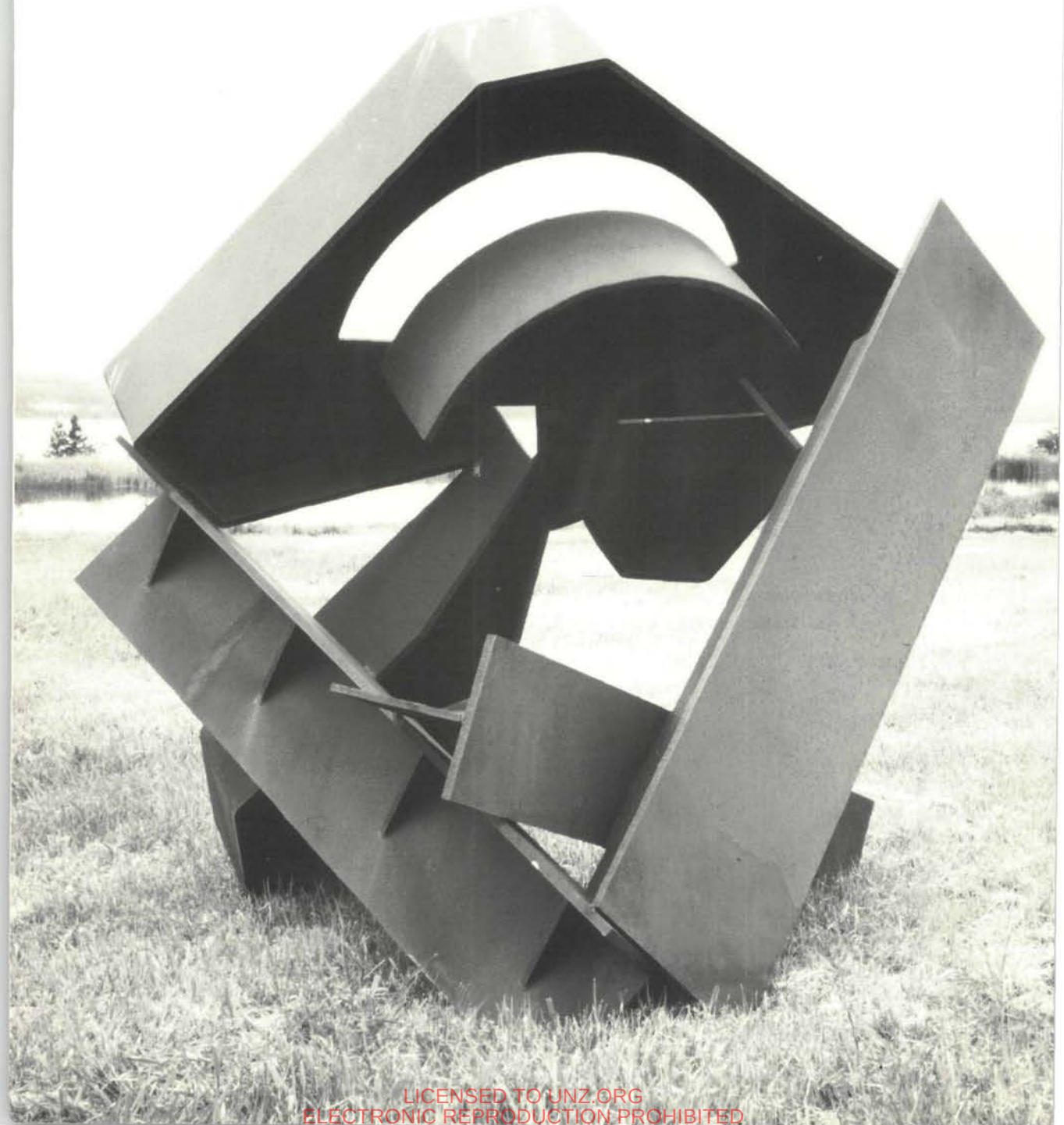

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"The Story of English" on PBS

by Bruce Bawer

This fall, television viewers in both America and Britain were presented with a nine-part series entitled *The Story of English,* co-produced by MacNeil-Lehrer Productions and the BBC. Though the series was purportedly a joint American-British endeavor, was hosted by the anchorman of an American news program, Robert MacNeil, and was funded principally by an American corporation (General Foods) and an American foundation (the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation), *The Story of English* had a decidedly British flavor. This should not be surprising, for it was conceived and co-written by an Englishman, Robert McCrum, the editorial director of Faber and Faber and a graduate of Cambridge University (the series' other writer of record was MacNeil, who is Canadian by birth), and was produced and directed by William Cran, an Oxford-educated journalist who has created documentaries for public television both here and in Britain. McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil are, furthermore, the authors of a companion book—also entitled *The Story of English*—which was published to coincide with the airing of the television show.[1]

The first episode of the series, entitled "An English-Speaking World," was less than promising. Its chief purpose seemed to be to tell us as many times as possible that English is "a language without frontiers," "the language of the global village of communication," "everybody's second language," "the indispensable language of progress for the Third World." MacNeil's cameras took us to Italy (where the multinational Iveco Corporation transacts all its business in English), to France (where the French-speaking countries, in general congress assembled, attempted to stem the tide of "Franglish" by coming up with French equivalents for *Walkman* and *compact disc*), to India (where young men want their brides to be fluent in English), to China (where the most popular television series is an English-language instructional program), to Japan, West Africa, Singapore, and so forth. This material started out by being fascinating and ended up by being very monotonous. The program dwelled in particular on California, whose "huge energy," MacNeil told us, "has overflowed into the language." He showed us surfers gabbing in "surf talk" ("check it out, dude"), Silicon Valley people using words like *on-line* and *high-tech,* and San Fernando Valley girls explaining "valley talk" (*grody, awesome*). An extremely unamusing homosexual comedian delivered a long routine that yielded exactly two examples of "gay slang" ("coming out of the closet," *queens*). Then, while we watched a group of women in sweatsuits practicing self-defense techniques, MacNeil rhapsodized about how "California has led the way in chopping sexism out of the language," and about how the

1 *The Story of English,* by Robert McCrum, William Cran, and Robert MacNeil. Elisabeth Sifton Books/Viking, 384 pages, $24.95.

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elimination of words like *chairman* and *mankind* spells "the end of linguistic male chauvinism." Finally, MacNeil spoke ominously about "Pentagon language" ("predawn vertical insertion") and explained that it was the "ordinary fighting man" who had enriched military English, by coining words like *snafu*.

MacNeil explained, near the beginning of this first episode, that the series would speak of *varieties* of English, not *dialects,* for the latter "is often a loaded word." He said:

> Our story is not about the correct way to speak English but about all the different varieties and how they came to be. Why a MacNeil from Nova Scotia sounds different from a MacNeil here in Scotland or one in North Carolina or New Zealand . . . . In fact the idea of a correct or proper way to speak is surprisingly recent. There is such an idea, of course. It's often referred to as the Queen's English or BBC English or Oxford English or public-school English.

Whereupon *The Story of English* took us to Winchester, where a few high-toned teenage boys told us about the pressures public-school boys are under to speak the Queen's English. What's important here is that MacNeil, in pronouncing his refusal to endorse a "correct" brand of English, failed to distinguish between accent, on the one hand, and grammar and vocabulary on the other. To endorse one accent as correct would of course be out-and-out snobbery; to suggest that the grammatical rules of Standard English should be followed, and the received meanings of the words in its vocabulary respected, is something else again. *The Story of English,* for what its creators patently considered (in their ineffable Oxbridgean way) to be noble and egalitarian reasons, consistently blurred this fundamental distinction. Accordingly, MacNeil insisted at the conclusion of the first episode that, for all the scholars and writers and poets who have written memorably in English, "the making of English is not imposed from above. It bubbles up from below, from the speech of every man and every woman." Despite such ringing populistic declarations, however, the series had an unmistakable *de haut en bas* tone; though I didn't know when I saw this first episode precisely who had created the series, it was obvious from the program's strange preoccupation with public-school English (no matter what MacNeil actually happened to be saying about it), as well as from its desperately misguided stab at egalitarianism, that *The Story of English* was, in large part, the product of the Oxbridge mentality, with its perverse combination of snobbism and *nostalgie de la boue.*

Fortunately, the series was not as consistently offensive as the first episode suggested it would be. At its best, *The Story of English* presented a respectable simplified course in the history of the language. Episode Two ("The Mother Tongue"), for instance, effectively summarized the story of the language's beginnings. It covered the Indo-European background; the fifth-century invasion of Celtic Britain by the Anglo-Saxons, who brought with them their language, Old English, and borrowed relatively few words (*crag, tor, Avon*) from the Celts; the introduction of Christianity, with its Greek and Latin vocabulary (*angel, disciple, martyr, shrine*), in AD 597; the coming of the Vikings, with their Norse vocabulary, between the eighth and eleventh centuries (thanks to which speakers of English can either *rear* or *raise* a child, the former word arising from Old English, the latter from Old Norse); and the Norman invasion of 1066, which added a huge French vocabulary to the language (giving us a choice between the Anglo-Saxon *kingly* and the French *royal, regal,* and *sovereign*) and resulted in the development of Middle English. The episode took a deep bow in the direction of Chaucer, the language's first great writer, and of William Caxton, its first printer, who played a major role in establishing the language's spelling conventions; and it ended with an excerpt from the fifteenth-century play *Mankind,* whose language "is thoroughly and recognizably English."

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The succeeding program, "A Muse of Fire," picked the story up from there, celebrating the English of the Renaissance, during which time between ten and twelve thousand new words were added to the language—words like *detail* (which was adapted from the French), *cupola* and *stucco* (Italian), *desperado* and *embargo* (Spanish), *smuggle* and *reef* (Dutch). From Latin, writers adapted words like *retrograde, reciprocal, defunct,* and *inflate,* which were widely regarded as pretentious and were known as "inkhorn terms." Sir Thomas More took the Latin word *communicare* and turned it into *communicate,* and Sir Philip Sidney combined the Greek words for "heat" and "measure" and created *thermometer.* The individual most responsible, however, for the enrichment of Renaissance English is Shakespeare, whose *Folio,* MacNeil told us, exerts a "direct influence on every one of us who speaks English today." Shakespeare, whose works contain a vocabulary of thirty-four thousand words (the greatest of any writer), "invented more words than anyone that ever lived," including *obscene* and *assassination*; a single line of *Macbeth* contains two new words, *multitudinous* and *incarnadine.* Shakespeare also made the language more flexible, using nouns for verbs (e.g., "grace me no grace"), and coined numerous phrases that have entered the language—which the program illustrated by a list of famous lines from *Hamlet* on the order of "Frailty, thy name is woman!" and "Alas poor Yorick." (The series' companion book does better by Shakespeare's phrase-making: it quotes a clever piece by Bernard Levin that is composed entirely of phrases originated by the Bard.) The program thereupon presented us with brief clips from the BBC's *Shakespeare Plays,* the purpose of which apparently was to remind us that Shakespeare wrote such lines as "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears," and "The quality of mercy is not strained."

The episode moved on from Shakespeare to cover the King James Bible of 1611 (whose vocabulary consists of an austere eight thousand words) and the colonization of America—whose variety of English was founded, as MacNeil put it, upon the English of Shakespeare and the King James Bible. The majority of the settlers at Jamestown, we were informed, came from the West Country of England, whose stressed "r" sound, which is uncharacteristic of most English speech, became a notable characteristic of American English; the Puritan settlers of Massachusetts, on the other hand, came mostly from East Anglia (where one can find the original towns of Boston, Lincoln, Braintree, Cambridge, etc.), thus accounting for the fact that the New England accent, with its flat "a" and unstressed "r" (among other things), bears a strong resemblance to the East Midlands dialect. These accentual similarities were demonstrated—as such things were throughout the series—in longish sequences that took us into neighborhood pubs and shops on both sides of the Atlantic to listen to the natives chat each other up. In spite of the occasional inane detour, then, the second and third episodes of *The Story of English* were mostly fine, and one was able to imagine them being used profitably in conjunction with a high-school English course.

The same was true—but to a somewhat lesser extent—of Episode Four ("The Guid Scots Tongue"). When the Normans invaded England, they sent many Anglo-Saxons fleeing into Scotland, thus giving rise to the Scots dialect. Episode Four told us that the Scots—whose variety of English, but for the seventeenth-century union of the two kingdoms, might well have developed into a separate language—nonetheless have played an important role in the dissemination of English. (Incidentally, in one of the many discrepancies between the series and the companion book, the series told us that Scots—not to be confused with Scots Gaelic, the all-but-extinct Celtic language of the Highlands—might under different circumstances have become as distinct from English as Danish is from Swedish; the book tells us that Scots did indeed become as distinct from English as Danish is from Swedish.) Many Scots-Irish, MacNeil explained, emi-

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grated to Philadelphia, and from there travelled westward through the Cumberland Gap, where their descendants speak the Appalachian dialect. That dialect's characteristic pronunciations (*bar* for *bear, cheer* for *here, hit* for *it*), in particular its open vowels, betray its Scottish origin. MacNeil maintained that not only the Appalachian accent, but the accents of the American Midwest and Southwest, all derive principally from Scots-Irish.

This episode—which was the first in the series to deal extensively with American English—had several notable failings. For one thing, like many of the episodes to follow, it sometimes fastened upon matters that seemed to have little or nothing to do with the topic at hand—truck drivers' CB-radio nicknames, for instance. More important, there was no mention that Charleston, South Carolina, received nearly as many Scots-Irish immigrants as did Philadelphia, and that the largest concentration of Americans of Scots-Irish ancestry is in the southern states. One expected to see this oversight repaired in a later episode, but it never was.

Indeed, the very next installment of the series compounded the confusion on this matter. This episode, interestingly enough, began in Charleston, but didn't so much as mention the Scots-Irish—or, for that matter, the French Huguenots, who also migrated in large numbers to Charleston and exerted a considerable influence upon the speech of white people in that part of the country. Entitled "Black on White," the segment was concerned rather with the influence of American blacks on world English. It was, one should add, probably the most disturbing episode of the series, the one that most plainly demonstrated the perverseness of many of the attitudes and assumptions upon which the entire series was constructed. "White American language and culture owe much to the blacks," MacNeil said by way of introduction. Whereupon he introduced us to an obnoxious pair of upper-class white Charlestonians—a pompous young man preparing for a game of polo, a snooty belle parading around in a crinoline dress suggestive of Scarlett O'Hara —whose English, MacNeil explained, was a direct descendant of the Plantation Creole once spoken by Southern slaves, which had in turn developed out of the makeshift English of the African slave coast. The implication was that the English of all white Southerners is strongly dependent upon Plantation Creole as is the English of Charleston; but the program failed to point out that the dialect of that city—the one-time center of the slave trade—is unique in the South, easily distinguishable from the English spoken in towns as close as fifty miles away.

This was not the episode's only peculiar omission. White Southern plantation children, we were told, learned to speak English from their black mammies, their black playmates, and their black house and field workers—who, significantly outnumbering the whites on the plantation, exerted a greater influence upon their language than did their parents. Well enough. But what of the great majority of white Southerners who were not plantation dwellers, outnumbered by their slaves? The program failed to take such people into account. (Those wealthy Charlestonians, with their aberrant accent and anachronistic way of life, were the only white Southerners featured in the whole series.) Nor, once again, did MacNeil distinguish between accent and grammar or vocabulary; certainly the grammar and vocabulary of most white Southerners were less influenced by Plantation Creole than were their accents.

MacNeil also introduced us to a community of blacks who live on the Sea Islands of South Carolina (and whose down-to-earth charm formed a distinct, and apparently intentional, contrast with the snootiness of the rich white Charlestonians). These blacks speak Gullah, a language peculiar to the Sea Islands, which is, in MacNeil's words, "one of the missing links between American and African civilization" and the "basis of black American English." From South Carolina, the program leapt across the ocean to the

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coast of West Africa where, two and three centuries ago, white and black slave traders communicated in West African pidgin English (a "pidgin" being a language with a simple grammar and limited vocabulary, and no native speakers, which is created so that people with different primary languages can talk to one another). This pidgin contained elements of a number of European and African languages (the pidgin word *pickaninny* derived from the diminutive of the Portuguese word *pequino,* "small"; *savvy* came from the French *savez-vous*). Because the captured slaves came from tribes that spoke a hundred and sixty different languages, pidgin English became their principal means of communication, not only with their captors but with one another; thus it developed, in time, into the English Creole of West Africa and the West Indies (a "creole" being a pidgin that has become the first language of a speech community) as well as into Plantation Creole—which, in turn, developed into Black English.

One aspect of Black English is "jive talk," which was spread to the white community by black musicians early in the twentieth century. Jive talk added an abundance of slang and colloquial words to the language —*uptight, jazz, groovy, lingo*—and gave new meanings to many old words, among them *cool, joint, square, chick, beat,* and *jam.* The program explored this phenomenon responsibly enough, but then wasted several minutes on "Mr. Spoons," a black Philadelphian shoeshine man who writes "poems" like this:

> Step up on the stand
> And get the best shine in the land.
> If you don't like your shine, you get your money back
> But if you don't pay, you get your head cracked.
> That's the business of the boot-black.

While Mr. Spoons recited "one of his finest poems," a less-than-impressive meditation on civil rights ("There just ain't no justice here for the Black man./How then can that be but wrong./You see they closed most of the schools to us down here,/And we pay taxes but afraid to vote."), we watched some Sixties-vintage film of white cops and dogs terrorizing black protesters. For a while, the supposed topic of the series got lost in the shuffle; the creators of *The Story of English* clearly felt obliged to remind us that (a) black people had a rough time in America for several centuries and (b) MacNeil, McCrum, and Cran felt just sick about it. So they took us on a little detour from the story of English and instead we got to see, for the hundredth time, the March on Washington and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, and got to hear MacNeil noting triumphantly that in the twenty years since that speech, "Blacks have gradually taken their rightful place in American life."

We then met one of the country's more successful blacks, Mayor Wilson Goode of Philadelphia, who, MacNeil informed us, once took a speech course in order to lose his North Carolina accent. In yet another of its habitual refusals to distinguish between differences in accent and differences in grammar and vocabulary, the program seemed to equate Mayor Goode's deliberate change of accent with the attempts of American educators to help black students learn Standard English. The program purported to take no sides in the controversy over Black English, but in actuality it came down strongly on the side of Black English, suggesting that one "variety" of language is as good as another, and even implying that the street kids who speak Black English are more vitally involved with language than are the English teachers who would have them adopt Standard English. After a black woman judge spoke eloquently against Black English, explaining that young black people need to master Standard English in order to compete equally in American society, MacNeil and company appeared to do their best to make her look like a reactionary, a traitor to her people and her culture. "Major changes in the language," MacNeil insisted, "don't happen because of educators and writers but on the street. The streets of the

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ghetto have been one of the great recent phrase- and word-factories of English."

And so MacNeil, in the last fifteen minutes or so of this episode, took us slumming on the ghetto streets, where "the traditions of Black English are alive and well." We met a gang of young blacks and listened to them converse with each other in their severely limited vocabulary (*funky fresh, wack, bad,* etc.) about a fight that one of them had almost gotten into with a dude from another gang; then we met a young street rapper named Perrey P who, MacNeil told us, has "made street talk into an art form all his own." Sample:

> Synthetics, genetics, command your soul,
> Trucks, tanks, laser beams
> Gus, blasts, submarines,
> Neutron, B-bomb, A-bomb, gas
> All that stuff will kill you fas'.

That their lack of fluency in Standard English all but guarantees that these street kids will grow into street adults seems not to have disturbed MacNeil, McCrum, and Cran; they displayed not the slightest hesitancy in celebrating the artfulness, the "vigor" and "zest," of these young people's language. One could not help but ask oneself: would MacNeil and company want their own children to talk this way, to be "artists" like Perrey P? Would William Cran hire a Perrey P to write one of his documentaries? Would MacNeil take him on as a reporter for *The MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour*? Would McCrum give him a Faber and Faber book contract? Of course not. There is no question but that the facile, modish praise of Perrey P and his brethren represented *The Story of English* at its most hypocritical, irresponsible, and condescending.

The next few segments of the series were considerably less worrisome. Episode Six ("Pioneers! O Pioneers!") covered the development of English in the American West, including the contributions of Mississippi riverboat gamblers ("up the ante," "deal me out"), the Forty-niners ("hit pay dirt"), the Indian pidgin ("no can do," "long time no see"), cowboy jargon (*lallapalooza, absquatulate,* "bite the dust," "hot under the collar"), frontier Spanish (*stampede, sombrero, loco*), and the railroads (*sidetrack, whistlestop,* "make the grade," "one-track mind"). The episode afforded MacNeil the opportunity to refer to the encounter between whites and Indians as a "tragic culture clash" and to deliver the following sentence, which was typical of the series at its most fatuously rhapsodic: "Railroads found a special place in America's heart, putting the country's energetic spirit on wheels, sweeping its people and their language to the remote corners of the Union, stirring the melting pot of American English." (This was almost as impressive as a sentence from the first episode, which made MacNeil, for a moment at least, sound strangely like *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk: "In this series we will take an extraordinary journey from an obscure Germanic tribe to the ends of the universe . . . .") There was also an apparent contradiction with Episode Four, which had maintained that the Scots-Irish were mostly responsible for the middle-American accent; now, MacNeil told us that the accent of the Midwest resulted from a merging of the accents of the eastern states.

But no matter. At this point—with a bow toward Whitman, who "celebrated the pioneer spirit of America," and toward Mark Twain (whose achievement was summarized by that all-purpose transatlantic authority, the redoubtable Alistair Cooke)—the episode turned to the contributions of non-English-speaking immigrants of the post-Civil War period. While we viewed the requisite film of huddled masses at Ellis Island, MacNeil read some purple prose about "this melancholy gateway to the New World"; then the program cut to New York's skyscrapers (with, somewhat disconcertingly, Copland's *Appalachian Spring* serving as the background music). We watched a parade in New York's Little Italy while MacNeil explained that the Italian language gave us words like *spaghetti* and *manicotti*; we watched a Steuben Day parade while MacNeil saluted Germany for giving us *kin-*

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dergarten, cookbook, and *delicatessen.* (At times, *The Story of English* made one downright hungry.) Finally MacNeil talked about how Jewish radio and television comedians spread Yiddish words (*chutzpah, schmaltz, kosher*) and phrases ("You should live so long," "Enough already") to the American public—apropos of which Leo Rosten, one of the many celebrated figures interviewed in the course of the series, offered a genuinely interesting observation about why Yiddish may well be (in MacNeil's words) "the most influential of immigrant languages." "Yiddish," he said, "lends itself to a remarkable range of psychological discriminations. It's steeped in sentiment and it's loosed with sarcasm. It knows that only paradox can do justice to the injustice of life. It adores irony because it knows that the only way Jews could retain their sanity was to view a dreadful world with ironic and astringent eyes."

But such moments of perceptiveness were few and far between in *The Story of English.* Episode Seven ("The Muvver Tongue") took a rather superficial, if diverting, look at the language of Cockneys and its influence upon Australian English (which also, the program informed us, preserves English localisms—Warwickshire's *larriken* for rowdy, rural Norfolk's *wowser* for killjoy—that are long since extinct in the Home Counties). Episode Eight ("The Loaded Weapon") was about Ireland and the Irish; it discussed the English language's borrowing of words like *smithereens, galore,* and *tantrum* from Irish Gaelic, the world's debt to Irish writers like Yeats and Joyce and Synge, and the Irish influence upon the New York accent in general and the coinage *yous* (as in "yous guys") in particular. Most of all, however, the episode seemed preoccupied with extremely familiar political matters—namely, with the centuries-old struggle between Ireland and England, in which the English language has of course played an important role. Accordingly, the program's final moments found MacNeil delivering an unsurprising conclusion to the effect that the Irish, their pipe dreams to the contrary, won't ever be able to shake off the English language and go back to Gaelic, but may yet "find in the accents of their English an escape from the prison of their history."

The series' closing installment, "The Empire Strikes Back," posed the question, "Will English, like Latin before it, gradually break up into separate languages?" MacNeil took us to Sierra Leone, Barbados, and Jamaica, where the natives speak English creoles. In Jamaica, activists expressed their desire to eliminate Standard English (which they look upon resentfully as "the language of authority") as the official state language, and to replace it with Jamaican Creole ("the language of the mass of the people"), so that street signs reading "No parking between signs," for instance, will be changed to read, "No paak betwiin dem sain ya." These activists—who referred to Jamaican Creole as the "nation language"—spoke of it in blatant political terms, encouraging its use not only on the island of Jamaica but among blacks, Jamaican and non-Jamaican alike, in Great Britain. Jamaican Creole, argued the Jamaican "dub" poet Desmond Johnson, is a unifying force among young blacks in London who "need to feel separate from a society that rejects them . . . . Caribbean patois gives them a language that's all theirs, and, when they imitate Jamaican Creole, a special sense of identity." MacNeil's contribution to all this, predictably enough, was to show us some Caribbean immigrant youngsters playing soccer in a London neighborhood and —apropos of their lively chatter, which was full of exotic soccer-related terms—to offer the observation that Jamaican Creole is "more expressive" than Standard English. (And what, one wondered, if these kids want to grow up to talk expressively about something other than soccer?) We watched snippets of a black riot in London while listening to a reggae protest song, then—as the song continued—saw a mural of a prone black man with a white man's foot pressing down upon his head. Ah, the joys of language!

MacNeil then took us to India, where, we learned, more and more words from the various Indian languages are creeping into

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Indian English. "Local energies," he said, "are driving people away from Standard English." And apparently, as far as he was concerned, this was all just hunky-dory. "Our language thrives on change," MacNeil proclaimed, and quoted Anthony Burgess to the effect that English is "gloriously impure." Which indeed it is; but neither he nor the other creators of this series seem to have understood the real meaning of Burgess's observation. Indeed, the entire series appeared to be founded upon the principle that *every* sort of linguistic impurity is unquestionably glorious, that *any* change that takes place in a language is by definition a sign of "vitality." The series made no distinction between the changes in English introduced by Shakespeare, who broadened and deepened the language's expressive range, and those introduced by street kids, say, or surfers, whose jargon renders them incapable of discussing anything more subtle or complicated or abstract than a street fight or a good wave. That there can be both good changes in language (changes that make it more precise, majestic, and profound) and bad changes (those that make it more fuzzy and simpleminded) seems never to have occurred to MacNeil and company.

The *Story of English* companion book is so attractively designed, illustrated, and produced that one wishes it were more wisely and beautifully written. To be sure, it is, in many respects, superior to the television series. Though it covers essentially the same material, with each of its nine chapters corresponding to an episode of the series, it manages most of the time to be less tedious and pointless than the program. Whereas Episode Seven, for instance, paid inordinate attention to an Australian comedian named Barry Humphries, who likes to dress up as a woman, the coverage of Humphries in the corresponding chapter of the book is mercifully limited to a single photograph of him in drag. (Ah, the British sense of humor!) Likewise, one of the weaker aspects of the series was the excessive amount of time it devoted to interviews with quaint, aged speakers of archaic dialects (an unusual number of whom, as it happened, were fishermen); the reader of the book is spared all that. Yet, like the series, the book has its flaws. It is the sort of volume in which the authors offer, as testimony to the importance of English, the fact that it is "the official language of . . . the Miss Universe competition," and, twenty-three pages later, having somehow arrived back at the same topic, remind us that English is the language of the Miss World contest as well. Errors abound. In Chapter Three alone, the geographical areas indicated on two maps of the eastern United States don't jibe with their description in the captions; the territory covered by New Spain is misidentified; the English word *chocolate* is said to be derived from a South American or Caribbean Indian language, when in actuality it comes from the Aztec language, Nahuatl; and Puerto Rico is referred to as a "neighbor" of the United States.

The book's prose (most of which is, reportedly, the work of Mr. McCrum) is often quite awkward. Chapter Three tells us, for instance, that Tangier Island in Chesapeake Bay "forms one of the most vivid parts of the fossilized English language on the eastern seaboard of the United States." From Chapter Seven: "Unlike the Germans, the less-educated Italians made a more complete adoption of American English." And from Chapter Eight: Australian society "contrasts its classlessness with Britain's."

That the book is principally the work of an Englishman is especially clear, to an American anyway, in the passages dealing with the United States. McCrum and his colleagues write that "Thomas Jefferson, with his usual prescience, had seen that when the slave states of the South and the free states of the North competed to join the Union, there would be trouble." (Certainly the word *territories* would have served better than *states.*) The authors refer to Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne—in contrast with Mark Twain—as "the men of the eastern districts." And, speaking of the European immigrants of more than a half-

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century ago, McCrum and company write that "in the schoolroom, and especially the playground, there were fierce pressures favoring the use of the American standard. The schools were the places where the immigrant children were rapidly Americanized by their playmates, and life was made intolerable, one imagines, for the child who had to use a foreign word rather than the English." On the contrary, most European immigrant children, living as they did in Jewish or Ukrainian or Italian ghettos, went to school with other European immigrant children; if they were rapidly Americanized nonetheless, it was because they and their parents *wanted* them to become Americans, to learn English and to make meaningful and productive lives for themselves in the New World. (In those days they didn't have Robert MacNeil to tell them, in his impeccable mid-Atlantic accent, how wonderful broken English could be; they didn't have Robert McCrum around, writing about "Americanization" as if it were some transatlantic counterpart of the Third Reich's Lebensborn program.)

The *Story of English* book manages to be at least as condescending as the television series. At the end of the "Black on White" chapter, for instance, the authors quote Walt Whitman to the effect that the English language has "its basis broad and low, close to the ground," and remark that "This is a sharp reminder that the best of English comes from a wide range of sources—Black and White." Pretty slick writing, that: the authors manage to praise black Americans and patronize them at the same time. (What's more, the sentence appears above two photographs of Martin Luther King and James Baldwin. Do the writers mean to suggest that King and Baldwin are in some way "low, close to the ground"?) In much the same vein, Chapter Eight tells us that "Italian Australians behave like Italians (promenading the street and ogling the girls)," while the book's epilogue, "Next Year's Words," describes Africans as "gifted linguists." (Are they also good tap dancers?)

Like the series, too, the book tends to wander into politics—and, when it does, tends not to find its way out for a good long time. Indeed, many of the political attitudes that are implicit in the television program are expressed more blatantly in the book. For example, McCrum and his colleagues mention with obvious dismay that "African governments, anxious in every other respect to throw off the shackles of imperialism, still show a genuine enthusiasm for speaking 'proper.'" The authors maintain that whereas the visits of Presidents Nixon and Reagan to Ireland were contrived for political purposes—with Nixon's visit, in particular, displaying "the element of chicanery so often associated with him"—President Kennedy's visit, by contrast, was "a genuine (though politically astute) pilgrimage, which drew huge crowds on a scale that his successors never matched." And the book complains that "gurus of grammar" like John Simon, William Safire, and Edwin Newman grouse too much about the possible dangers of English-Spanish bilingualism in America. The creators of *The Story of English,* naturally, don't worry about the consequences of American bilingualism. They've got it all figured out. "Black Power, Hispanic Rights, Feminism, Gay Liberation, anti-Americanism: these are some of the issues of our time, and the English language will always be used by conservatives as a stick with which to beat the opposition." According to *The Story of English,* it's as simple as that: the only problem connected with bilingualism, Black English, and so forth is that there are reactionary fuddy-duddies out there who persist in talking about these things as if they *were* problems. If your next-door neighbor tendered such a misguided opinion of Safire, Simon, and Newman—a group of writers whose principal offense, apparently, is to take a responsible attitude toward their language and their society—it would be ridiculous, nothing more. But for the creators of a high-profile property like this one to propagandize for such a point of view is nothing less than outrageous. In the end, this sneer at linguistic standards tells us all that we need to know, really, about the sensibility behind *The Story of English.*

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The fall of the idols

by David Gress

The liberation of France from German occupation in 1944 marked not only the restoration of democratic political life but also the beginning of a new dominance of the Left in French cultural life. This dominance did not decline until the late Seventies. With the exception of the political philosopher Raymond Aron, who died three years ago at the age of seventy-eight, virtually every prominent French writer, thinker, film director, or journalist of the period 1944-1975 was either a member of the Communist Party or Socialist Party, or a close sympathizer with one or both. The greatest intellectual battles of the period were fought over how, not whether, to justify Stalin's genocides; over how, not whether, to destroy the United States and capitalism; over how, not whether, to subvert what was seen as the pernicious notion of individual freedom. Since this period was also the period of French culture's greatest influence and prestige abroad in modern times, what became known and admired throughout the West was the culture of the French Left. Writers who held positions at odds with the dominant French culture were hardly known outside France, even by specialists. As in the late nineteenth century, French culture was radically divided between an urban, internationally renowned element on the Left and a hidden, reclusive, anti-cosmopolitan element on the Right. In the period 1944-1975 the former was never seriously threatened by the latter. When the Left fell, it fell by reason of its own inner contradictions and its own nihilism.

The dominant leftist culture in France was a total way of life. It included not merely political beliefs—which might, in fact, vary within the general spectrum of the Left—but also attitudes toward sex, love, marriage, the family, and work, and convictions about the relation of literature and art to politics. Ironically, this way of life was no less confining and tyrannical than the bourgeois life its adherents so despised. In fact, its confining nature and narrow intolerance were one reason for its eventual collapse, as more and more of its proponents gave it up or adopted a double standard exactly analogous to the double standard that was said to belong to the bourgeoisie. Roland Barthes and Jean-Paul Sartre, to take two leading representatives of this dominant culture, were increasingly unable or unwilling to practice what they preached. They preached the meaninglessness of inherited notions of decency, love, and devotion, and argued for what they regarded as a cold realism in politics and literature. This cold realism required absolute submission to totalitarian Marxism and to a style of writing which, in their view, was not a style at all but the only true representation of the reality of human life in a world struggling to free itself from the illusions of Christianity and democracy. Yet in the end they could not sustain this vision, nor could their followers. Thus the movement ended—in solipsism and disarray.

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There is no entirely adequate label for the movement we are discussing. Its adherents had different concerns and compulsions, but common to them all was certainly a powerful cultural radicalism. Perhaps "cultural radicals" is the best shorthand term for them.

In the beginning, the leading cultural radical was Sartre, whose philosophy was called Existentialism, a word that came to describe the larger enterprise of which he was a part. Later, beginning around 1960, structuralism, a theory concerned with the very foundations of linguistics, anthropology, and literary criticism, took over as the feature of French culture best known—and most admired—abroad. The common message of the structuralists was, as Peter Caws described it in the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas,* that "the condition of man is such that his meanings always come from outside himself—from elsewhere, from the Other, from the system of discourse within which he becomes aware of the possibility of meaning." In other words, languages, myths, social institutions, poems, paintings, novels, indeed all human utterances and actions, are not ordained and expressed by men but are determined by the "structure." And the French thinkers in question—Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Derrida above all—claimed to be uniquely capable of unmasking this truth about culture and society, and of presenting it to the world.

Thus, French cultural radicalism had, both in its original incarnation in France and in its repercussions abroad, two overlapping phases. Or rather, it had three. In Paris, the late Seventies and early Eighties witnessed the emergence, from within the conflict-ridden and disintegrating structuralist camp, of the doctrine of post-structuralism. Though difficult to pinpoint exactly, post-structuralism has attempted to preserve the message of structuralism—that structures, however created, determine consciousness and behavior—while granting some provisional autonomy to human reflection and activity. Jacques Derrida launched this enterprise around 1970 with the ingenious argument that, in the words of Mr. Caws, "structure emerges when language is employed to raise the question of language, when the subject raises the question of subjectivity, when man seeks the essence of man." And this structure, though composed of bits of human action and thought, is indifferent to the materials of which it is made. Or, as Lévi-Strauss put it, structure operates at a level "at which a kind of necessity becomes apparent, underlying the illusions of liberty."

The post-structuralist revision of the original, uncompromising approach served also to give the whole enterprise a new lease on life on American campuses. Here in the United States, Derrida in particular, but also his more rigorous forebears, enjoy even today a peculiar postmortem existence, and ghosts of ideas long-forgotten or long-ridiculed in Paris stalk the halls of graduate-school departments from Yale to Stanford.

Like all significant political or cultural movements, the movement that began with Sartre's Existentialism in the mid-Forties and ended in Derrida's post-structuralism in the mid-Seventies had its fundamental myths and its particular version of history by which it sought to legitimize itself. Three elements of this mythology were especially important, because they served to distinguish the world view of the cultural radicals from that of the rest of French culture.

First, the movement's leaders had a particular vision of the Enlightenment and saw themselves as its only true heirs. Their Enlightenment was not the liberal rationalism of a Diderot or a Turgot, committed to the use of reason and determined to oppose intolerance and coercion in human affairs. Rather, their Enlightenment was the radical atheism of a d'Holbach or a de Sade, or of a Voltaire in his worst moments, combining an utter contempt for religion, both Christianity and Judaism, with an exaggerated fear of its power. Another aspect of this radical Enlightenment tradition was a thirst for violence (often satisfied vicariously), as

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though the acceptance of violence somehow demonstrated a greater toughness of mind. Sartre and his followers, more so than the structuralists, demonstrated this particular fascination.

Some of the fiercest battles, and deepest resentments, of the cultural radicals were directed against those whom they accused of misunderstanding or betraying the legacy of the radical Enlightenment. Raymond Aron, who was a fellow student of Sartre's at the École Normale Supérieure in the early Thirties, was the towering example in his generation of the mainstream Enlightenment, with its faith in reason, tolerance, and democracy. From the mid-Forties to the late Seventies, Sartre refused to speak to Aron, and when he could be bothered to pay attention to Aron's epochal publications in history, sociology, and international politics, he invariably covered them with abuse. Aron, whose public manners were impeccable, would not reply in kind, and maintained, when asked, that Sartre was probably the more profound thinker whose reputation would no doubt outlast his own. Finally, in 1979, a reconciliation of sorts was effected when a group of French intellectuals met for the purpose of raising funds for the boat people fleeing Communist tyranny in Vietnam. The event was largely organized by André Glucksmann, who was both a former student of Aron's and a friend of Sartre's. He contrived a meeting between the two at which Aron hailed Sartre, now blind and ailing, with the old greeting of the *normaliens* of fifty years before: "Bonjour, mon petit camarade!" Thus what we are justified in calling the true Enlightenment forgave its false and vicious caricature.

The second myth of the Sartrean-structuralist movement was the myth of revolution. The American experience of revolution is of a primarily political process by which national and democratic rights are secured and expanded. Not so in the French radical tradition, of which (in this respect) Sartre and the structuralists were the heirs. In this tradition, revolution was only partly a political struggle for rights. Its more important aspect was the outburst of mass violence, physically and morally irresistible, by which human history was thought to move by iron necessity, and through oceans of blood, to a new and higher stage. This notion of revolution obviously owed much to the Leninist principles put into practice in Russia in 1917-21 and again by Stalin when he destroyed the peasantry in 1930-34. But it also derived from the cultural radicals' fascination with violence. Revolutionary violence came to be conceived of as an almost transcendental necessity—a cathartic, purifying experience. Only a deeply irrational—one is almost tempted to say sexual—focus on the need for violence explains the contempt for any merely political or diplomatic solution to the problems of the Third World displayed by Sartre and other writers in the Sixties. When the testimonies of various East European refugees and the translations of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* helped to destroy the mystique of revolutionary violence in the Paris of the Seventies, it was, therefore, a blow to the very heart of the political ideology of the French cultural radicals.

Their third myth concerned French history, particularly the history of the German occupation and the French Resistance movement (1940-44). Although Sartre himself was not in the Resistance and was not at any time threatened with prison or censorship for his teaching or his writings (his plays were even performed in Nazi-occupied Paris), he and the other members of the postwar movement later made membership in the Communist-dominated Resistance the criterion of political virtue. Moreover, they regarded the left wing of the Resistance as the culmination of a century or more of struggle against the reactionary forces of nationalism and Catholicism. These forces, according to left-wing ideology, demonstrated their inherently oppressive and inhuman nature by failing to oppose German National Socialism or French Fascism and by collaborating with the German occupiers. This was a gross simplification. It is true that Pétain and Laval, the chief figures of the collaborationist government of Vichy, came

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out of the nationalist right wing of French politics and that for them the strategy of collaboration was a strategy of national survival through accommodation with the conquering power. But there were many prominent French Catholics who fought in the Resistance for motives arguably purer than those of the Communists, who wished only to replace one tyranny with another. Similarly, many French nationalists gave their lives for their country. The net effect of the postwar Parisian ideology, however, was to delegitimize nationalism and Catholicism as political forces by tainting them with the mark of collaboration. Of course, the two years of Communist collaboration with the Germans during the period of the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939-41 was passed over in silence.

This last myth gave the postwar Parisian Left a seemingly decisive victory in its struggle for control of French politics and culture. The struggle itself had begun long before, however. Its origins could be traced to the Revolution of 1789, when the progressive Left, the national Right, and the Church first defined themselves as the country's principal antagonists. The conflict took place in two arenas, politics and culture, but the dominant party in one was not always dominant in the other. The progressive Left was in political control during the Revolution itself, during the July Monarchy period of 1830-1848, and during most of the Third Republic (1871-1940). Culturally, the progressive Left was dominant throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, not in the sense that all articulate Frenchmen were on the Left, but in the sense that the Left largely set the agenda of debate. This domination irritated both the nationalist Right and the Catholic forces, but they were unable to do much about it until after the defeat of France by Prussia in 1870, which brought about the fall of the Second Empire and the establishment of the Third Republic. The Third Republic was tainted for nationalist conservatives because in their eyes it was a government founded on defeat and humiliation. They thus used every opportunity to ridicule and conspire against the Republic. The most dramatic case of their abuse was, of course, the Dreyfus Affair, whose repercussions lasted well beyond World War II. The "Affair," as it came to be called, had begun when a Jewish officer, Alfred Dreyfus, was convicted of espionage in 1894 on false evidence. It culminated in 1898-99 with his second trial, which crystallized the political and cultural forces in play. On the Right, the Dreyfus Affair led to the formation of the anti-Semitic Action Française; and on the Left, it served as a stimulus to the radical and socialist parties. In the end, the Affair could be said to have been a political and cultural victory for the progressive Left and a defeat for the nationalist Right and, to a lesser extent, for the extreme anti-republican and anti-Semitic wing of the Church.

During the Thirties, these three forces were closely matched both culturally and politically. There was a strong revival of Catholic political involvement, led by Jacques Maritain; and the progressive Left benefited from the rapid artistic and literary developments of the time, particularly Surrealism. The German occupation dampened but did not stifle these cultural developments. What it did do was to permit the postwar Left to read the national Right out of court as a legitimate force.

The rise and fall of this dominant culture of postwar France—which is to say, of postwar Paris—has now been entertainingly and sensitively chronicled by Jean-Paul Aron, a novelist, cultural critic, and historian of ideas of a type once common in Western Europe but now, alas, fast disappearing. His book, *Les Modernes*,[1] is made up of fifty-four short chapters, each devoted to a specific event—a conference, a publication, a public statement—in the history of what he calls, somewhat misleadingly, the "moderns." What Jean-Paul Aron (no relation to Raymond Aron) means by this term are the adherents,

1 *Les Modernes*, by Jean-Paul Aron; Gallimard, 318 pages, 75 FF.

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associates, and fellow travellers of the ideology of cultural radicalism I have been describing. The title of *Les Modernes* is slightly ambiguous, however, and not, I think, particularly well chosen. It is true that the "moderns" thought they represented the progressive forces of history and culture, forces destined for victory; but their ideas cannot be said to be an entirely accurate expression of modernism in art or politics, nor can modernism be reduced to their ideas.

Les Modernes is not strictly an analysis of cultural radicalism—rather, it is an example of a peculiarly French mode of critical writing, in which opinion and judgment are conveyed by ellipsis and allusion. The author takes great pains to avoid direct statement of what he is trying to say. The events Aron chooses to write about include the publication of books by Bataille, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and Foucault; an evening in 1952 with Pierre Boulez, the composer and conductor; the foundation in 1950 of the Club Mediterranée; the 1954 Giacometti exhibition at the Galerie Maeght; the deaths of Gide, Bataille, and Merleau-Ponty; a seminar by Jacques Lacan, the radical psychoanalyst, in 1964; and the inauguration in 1952 of the Décades de Cérisy, a conference of cultural figures which meets every year at a manor in Normandy.

The chapter on the Décades de Cérisy is a good illustration of Aron's method, or rather lack of it. Aron starts by talking, in a very general way, about the rise of academic intellectuals to positions of dominance in modern France. He traces this rise to the time of Napoleon or, perhaps, to the restored Bourbon monarchy of 1815-30 (precise dates are not Aron's forte). An extended discussion, which one would call a digression were it not for the fact that such discussions take up most of the book, deals with a veritable potpourri of issues: intellectuals under the Third Republic, the Dreyfus Affair, Proust, liberal Christianity, the anti-Semitism of Barrès, and, more to the point, the intellectual gatherings at Pontigny sponsored by the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (the mainstay of the Gallimard publishing house, without which the entire cultural movement of the Left would not have existed). In the midst of these remarks Aron delivers himself of numerous off-the-cuff judgments, for example the observation (if that is the right word for it) that the last decades of centuries have often been bad times for France. He cites the 1390s, the 1590s, the 1690s, the 1790s, and, of course, the 1890s, when declining birth rates, economic recession, alcoholism, syphilis, urban blight, and massive psychological alienation were, supposedly, everywhere evident. What all this means is left up to the reader: Aron never offers a logical progression or a summing-up.

One purpose of Aron's digressions into the French cultural and political past is, I think, clear: it is to show that his "moderns" were neither as modern nor as unique as they liked to think. All their foibles, their vanities, and even their antics on particular occasions were repetitions of a style characteristic of intellectuals on the rise throughout four centuries of French history. The distinctive feature of the "moderns," from this perspective, was not so much their politics as a combination of two other articles of belief: their conviction that an objective description of human feelings must contradict all inherited canons of literary or philosophical style, and an iron consistency in applying that conviction.

Aron makes this point explicitly in another recent book, a collection of interviews by the British journalist Melinda Camber Porter entitled *Through Parisian Eyes.*[2] Porter is actually more interested in filmmaking than in literature, philosophy, or journalism, and she reserves her greatest enthusiasm for her interviews with François Truffaut, Louis Malle, Costa-Gavras, Eric Rohmer, or Alain Resnais, or with novelist-cineasts such as Alain Robbe-Grillet or Marguerite Duras. Robbe-Grillet, for one, also appears in *Les Modernes,* but to Porter he is interesting

2 *Through Parisian Eyes: Reflections on Contemporary French Arts and Culture,* by Melinda Camber Porter; Oxford University Press, 256 pages, $18.95.

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mainly as an example of the writer as film director. With the exceptions of Jean-François Revel, Olivier Todd, Bernard-Henri Lévy, and Jean-Paul Aron himself, her interlocutors are immersed in the ideology of the cultural radicals. Since they are primarily visual artists, however, they do not articulate their political assumptions as clearly as Aron's subjects.

In his remarks to Melinda Porter, Aron refers to the tendency of the "moderns" to show "a curious taste for objectivity . . . the illusion that you can transcribe a so-called objective view of the world." What Aron does not tell us directly, either in the interview or in his own book, however, is *why* so many of these "moderns" felt driven to this ideal of objectivity. Was objectivity not, after all, a principle of the science and politics of the status quo, the science and politics that they were committed to overthrowing? Perhaps we are dealing with two radically opposed notions of objectivity. Or is there some other, additional explanation for the peculiar temperament of the "moderns"?

To answer these questions we must identify that ideology against which the cultural radicals asserted their peculiar form of objectivity and their other standards of style; and we must examine in more detail their own history as recounted by Aron.

As we have already observed, the period from 1944 to around 1960 in French intellectual life was dominated by Sartre, and, toward the end, by his argument with Albert Camus about the justification of Marxist revolution. In this once-famous argument, Camus wound up (almost) defending liberal democracy as superior to any revolutionary regime, no matter how pure its motives. There followed the period of structuralism, which petered out in Paris by around 1975 but which has lived on in American academia. These two stages can also be observed on the level of theory. Sartre posited a philosophy according to which there is no meaning to existence other than what emerges from one's own struggle with it. To take this view, according to Sartre in the Forties and Fifties, was to be "objective" about reality. At that point Sartre could have gone in either of two directions. He could have taken the Nietzschean position adopted by some later French thinkers, such as Michel Foucault (whom Aron includes prominently among the "moderns"), and advocated an essentially apolitical stance equally contemptuous of the progressive Left and the reactionary Right. Or he could do what he in fact did and argue that there was, after all, some residual meaning to existence, and that this meaning lay in revolution and the final destruction of liberal democracy and capitalism.

The structuralists started with different concerns but many of them arrived at the same position. The birth of structuralism, according to Aron, was signaled by three events that occurred between 1949 and 1953. In 1949, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss published his first major work, entitled *The Elementary Structures of Kinship.* In it, he interpreted exogamous marriage—and the incest taboo on which the requirement of marriage within kinship groups rests—as exemplifying a universal structure, namely the structure of exchange, in this case of women and property. This structure in turn indicated, as he put it, "that the relations between the sexes might be regarded as one of the modalities of a great 'function of communication' which includes language as well." Anthropological structuralism turned out to be an adjunct of linguistics, which is where Lévi-Strauss seemed to want it all along. He has later argued that linguistic structuralism is the only true structuralism, and rejects those who try to make structuralism into a universal ideology of explanation. In this, as in his increasing tendency to political conservatism, Lévi-Strauss is decidedly an odd man out among the "moderns."

The second and third events in structuralism's early history were the publication, in 1953, of the first novel by Robbe-Grillet, *The Erasers,* and the first work of criticism by Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero.* The novel—with its neutral, cameralike narration—exemplified Barthes's argument, which was that all inherited modes of writing

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including the modern modes of stream-of-consciousness and expressionism, were inadequate because the writing was not "pure": they were contaminated by association with and derivation from the dominant (bourgeois and capitalistic) culture and its ideology. In Barthes's view, art and literature should, as Aron paraphrases it, "go into hibernation," become anonymous and unidentifiable, denying the individualism and definition that, for Barthes, were characteristic of the ideology of bourgeois democratic society. In later works, Barthes held that what writes a novel (or any other text) is not the author but the structure of the text itself. In literature, as in anthropology or other sciences of culture and society, the message of the "moderns" was that essentially there is no free will and no meaning other than the meaning inherent in the control exercised by "structure" over human behavior.

It needs to be asked, then: What were the Sartreans and structuralists fighting against? The clue to the cultural part of the answer is the power of the classical tradition of French rhetoric and literary style. Beginning in the Renaissance and culminating in the seventeenth century, French writers developed an armory of rhetoric, with different types suitable for every occasion—an armory that was taught to every schoolboy and inculcated in French schools up to the very recent past. Indeed, all the figures discussed in Aron's book were trained in this tradition. As part of their dramatic leftward turn in the Thirties and Forties they naturally came to see this rhetorical tradition as part of the structure of oppression and reaction they were determined to destroy. Thus, the notion of writing at "degree zero," violating all the canons of the tradition and denying any relationship between form, meaning, and content in any written (or spoken) message, became an essential part of the program of the radical movement.

The political part of the answer harks back to what we have already noted: the discrepancy between the political and cultural power of the French progressive Left throughout its history. The postwar period provided, perhaps, the most striking example of that discrepancy. The Socialist Party held intermittent power during the Fourth Republic (1944-58), and again after 1981, but the Communists never obtained national power. The Parisian "moderns," moreover, totally despised the socialist politicians, who, in their view, had sold out to the system to the extent that they actually participated in democratic politics. With the exception of certain regions, notably the working-class suburbs of Paris known as the "red belt," where for decades the Communist Party exercised local authority by the purest totalitarian methods, the progressive Left from 1944 to 1981 enjoyed virtually no political power, despite its stature in France's cultural life. Thus, the political struggle of the Sartreans and structuralists was primarily with the political elite of their own country, an elite with no cultural power and few articulate spokesmen able to address the "moderns" on their own terms.

The specific events chronicled by Jean-Paul Aron are not distributed equally across the forty years after the liberation in 1944 but fall roughly into two clusters, one around 1950 and one around 1960. For the period from May 1968 to 1983, the date of his last chapter, there are only eight incidents, most of them fairly marginal to the real concerns of the "moderns." Aron's subjects include events from such academic disciplines as philosophy and anthropology, from literature, art, and journalism, from what is called "life-style," and from politics. This last category contains only six incidents, but they are all crucial to the history of the movement, since they helped to determine what happened in other areas as well.

One of the early chapters in Aron's book concerns the publication, in November 1945, of the second issue of Sartre's house journal, *Temps modernes,* which had the same status in the early part of this period as the structuralists' house journal, *Tel quel,* had in the Sixties. Aron uses this issue of *Temps modernes* to explain exactly what was wrong

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about the new movement's message and methods.

> The title [of the journal] annoyed me. It was not just that it did not mark the beginning of an epoch but its end, or that in claiming to be concerned with real subjects and meanings it in fact dealt the cards of an ideology based on notions of object and structure . . . . How could I not sense the abominable traces of a sensibility which was to dominate postwar France for decades, sacrificing objects to words and reality to illusion? It was as if the conscience of the West, in some monstrous deviation, had tasted falsehood in the concentration camps only to impose it as a noble and universally valid form of thought.

Aron's particular judgment in this instance is a bit unfair, for he chooses as an example of the sacrifice of reality to illusion and to totalitarian abstraction an article by the then twenty-year-old Claude Lefort. In fact, Lefort consistently opposed the cultural-radical sensibility. Calling himself a democratic socialist, Lefort in later years published the journal *Socialisme ou barbarie* along with the ex-Trotskyite Cornelius Castoriadis, and became the most articulate defender in France of the human rights of Central Europeans under Communist rule. In 1980, Lefort, in a brilliant piece, castigated the government of President Giscard d'Estaing for its hostile attitude toward the Polish Solidarity movement and its policy of appeasement toward the Soviet and Polish Communist regimes. Castoriadis, for his part, became a vociferous proponent of the view that the Soviet Union had become a "stratocracy," that is, an essentially aggressive regime governed by "military rule" and geared toward armed expansion and war. Both Lefort and Castoriadis were crucial figures in destroying residual sympathy for Communism and the Soviet Union on the French Left.

The very next entry in *Les Modernes* concerns the founding of the quarterly *Critique* by Georges Bataille, a polymath intellectual with interests in economics and anthropology who was also a friend of the Surrealists and a writer of pornographic stories and poems. The subject provides Aron with a chance to denounce "the program of substituting debate for creativity, of theory for life." This program, he says, was typical of the "Parisian cultural clan" whose origins he traces:

> The writers, philosophers, and bourgeois savants were accepted by the aristocracy after 1730 only to become its masters, because the aristocrats had lost their faith in God . . . and in the monarchy . . . . The clan gradually perpetuated, among its members, the ancient figure of the caste . . . . To be part of it required great patience and painful initiations . . . . The clan, moreover, behaved like a war machine, blustering and intimidating before pulverizing its adversaries . . . . Scattered from 1945 to 1984 among disparate aesthetic and ideological tendencies, it presented itself always as a totalitarian enterprise determined to see its laws obeyed.

March 1948 is the date of the first political event to warrant an entry in Aron's chronicle. It describes the efforts to organize a political party, the R.D.R. (Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire) in reaction to the formation, a year before, of a new Gaullist party. The leading figures in the R.D.R. were Sartre, Camus, the fellow traveller Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the Trotskyite David Rousset, and the left-wing Catholics Emmanuel Mounier and Jean-Marie Domenach (the latter a subsequent convert to a moderate conservatism). This was the high point of the alliance between the "moderns" and the Catholic Left, and it resulted in a curious but influential mixture of anti-capitalism, Third-Worldism, anti-Americanism, and faith in the glorious illusion of a Communist society sanctified by a renewed and revitalized Church. The Catholic Left in France later suffered a fate analogous to that of the "moderns" as a whole. For a while, in the Seventies, it controlled the agenda and the attitudes of the hierarchy of the French Church. The election of the

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Polish Pope, John Paul II, in 1978, however, deprived it of Vatican support at exactly the time that the informed French Left was moving away from Marxism and the theory that Western imperialism was the cause of misery in the Third World. It is today a declining force without much influence even in what used to be its house organ, the journal *Esprit*.

Back in 1948, there were great hopes for the R.D.R. But they were immediately dashed thanks to a delicious irony: Rousset, who was the first man in the West to publish extensive and accurate documentation on the Soviet Gulag (in 1947)—a crime for which the hard Left, including Sartre, never forgave him—had obtained funding for the new party from, of all places, the United States! The American Federation of Labor, probably in the belief that they were supporting the anti-Communist Left, covered the cost of the first great rally and sent a representative, an American academic who closed the opening proceedings with a rousing Cold War speech. Scandal and derision—and no new party.

The "moderns" whose history Jean-Paul Aron has chronicled did not believe in "personality," yet their clan revolved entirely around a few great egos and many lesser ones. After Sartre and Barthes, perhaps the most influential member was the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. His career began in the Thirties, but he achieved notoriety in 1953 when he engineered a dramatic split in the French psychoanalytic community. Aron, in one of his characteristically elliptical digressions, associates Lacan's methods and theories with those underlying the Minimalist movement in American art, with its "plastic extenuation of reality and pulverization of life, and above all that universal tendency to confusion which has deprived contemporary culture of its ability to appreciate time." Lacan, he says, was obsessed with method and with the claim that he alone among psychoanalysts had discovered a reliable way of determining the structure of conscious and unconscious thought. This method depended on the notion that a patient's conscious mind and desires were unimportant, because they were really controlled by the Other. For Lacan, this Other was the structure of language, determining human thought and action. Therefore Lacan's psychoanalytic sessions lasted only a few minutes rather than an hour. "This *minimal experience,*" comments Aron, "followed the tradition of ellipsis that had affected all of Western culture since World War I." It began in music, according to Aron, with Schoenberg and Webern, and then affected drama, with Ionesco and Beckett, and then art, with Giacometti, whose sculptures seem as though they are "drawn into themselves only to resurge insolently from nothingness." In a later entry, concerning Lacan's triumphant inauguration as professor at the École Normale Supérieure in 1964, Aron calls Lacan "the winter sun that has frozen French culture for more than thirty years."

The second political entry in Aron's book conflates two related events, namely Khrushchev's speech in February 1956 to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on Stalin's crimes, and the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in November of that same year. The third describes the situation in Paris in the spring of 1958, when de Gaulle returned to power after twelve years, changing the constitution and inaugurating the Fifth Republic. The intellectuals of the Left—or the "clan," as Aron calls them—were appalled. Why was there no workers' uprising to prevent this "military dictatorship"? In the event, de Gaulle's regime proved to be more hospitable than the Fourth Republic to the ideology of the intellectuals. As the journalist and novelist Olivier Todd implies in his remarks to Porter, de Gaulle and the clan shared one essential political impulse or instinct, and that was anti-Americanism. For de Gaulle, anti-Americanism was a legacy of the war, of his own profound nationalism and his colossal inferiority complex, whereas for the cultural radicals it was an ideological necessity based on their political mythology. What mattered was that the two

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complemented each other very well. When de Gaulle tried to undermine the unity of Canada by stirring up Francophone nationalism in Quebec in 1967, or when he denounced the Vietnam War, his motives were not those of the cultural radicals, but they were delighted. And the General reciprocated. In 1968, during the worst demonstrations in Paris, when de Gaulle himself momentarily despaired of keeping power, his chief of police suggested arresting Sartre for some particularly outrageous and incendiary statements designed to promote anti-government violence. The General's answer was simple: "One does not arrest Voltaire." Thus even the political ruler of the state, condemned to the dustheap of history by the clan's ideology, succumbed to its pretentions.

Around 1960, Aron's list of events in *Les Modernes* flows thick and fast: Philippe Sollers, a young writer, founds the journal *Tel quel,* soon to become captive to structuralism in all its manifestations; Jean-Luc Godard releases *Breathless,* a film which did more than any other single work to propagate the ethos of the "moderns"; and Sartre, working toward a self-imposed deadline with the aid of masses of amphetamines, completes the first and only volume of his *Critique of Dialectical Reason.* In this, his second major philosophical work after *Being and Nothingness,* he tried to reconcile reason and revolution. The earlier work had presented the human condition in the modern, de-Christianized era as one of existence "by and for oneself," despite the alienation that was a necessary part of the collapse of religion and of the liberal belief in progress that had succeeded it. The death of God "condemned man to freedom." But Sartre soon came to feel that this original Existentialism lacked a social dimension. Man's condemnation to freedom must, he argued, entail working for the liberation of others as well. By 1947, the goal of liberating others had become an exhortation to support the Communist Party against the democratic West. In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* Sartre concluded that democratic states and institutions were congealed structures of "unfreedom." Communist states were only conditionally unfree, because their purpose was universal liberation. Thus their methods and practices were excused in the name of an overarching strategy.

Sartre's attempt to justify totalitarianism failed in all but his own terms, but he remained sure of one thing. "An anti-Communist is a dog," he wrote. "I shall never again depart from that certainty." His conviction, and his lifelong flirtation with the Communist Party, which never ended in full conversion, reminds Aron that Sartre, like Gide and Barthes, belonged by birth to that one percent of Frenchmen who are Protestants. Perhaps Aron means to imply that there was in the stubborn philosopher an innate streak of independence. If so, it was rarely obvious. More typical was Sartre's insistence that the criterion of truth is what is politically correct. The primary evil, for Sartre, was the capitalist and democratic state. It represented the culmination of all oppression throughout history; it was the embodied denial of the Existentialist command to be free. The project of undermining it and replacing it with "true" freedom was both a political and a philosophical struggle, and in that struggle the criterion of truth was what served freedom (as Sartre defined it). In the Existentialist vision, freedom (or liberation) was in itself the highest truth about the human condition. Bourgeois notions of objective scientific truth, and more particularly bourgeois notions of political truth, were part of the ideology of the enemy. That is to say, not only should certain truths (for example, concerning the Gulag) not be told, but, being contrary to political necessity, they must be redefined as lies. This, if anything, is the political face of Sartrean Existentialism, and this is what finally caused Camus to break with his comrade, thereby earning the undying hatred of the cultural radicals.

Speaking to Melinda Porter, Olivier Todd describes how Existentialist truth operated in French journalism in the Sixties, preventing a true assessment of the Vietnam War:

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> I did support Hanoi and the Vietcong for many years. In the *Nouvel Observateur* there are still some articles that I have published that make me really blush. I changed my mind much too late. It's obvious that when I landed in Vietnam in February 1965 for the first time that I should have known what was actually going on. It took me from 1965 to 1973 to see the light. I mean, how slow can you be? When I came back and told the paper, "Boys, we've made a mistake, these guys are Red fascists," all hell broke loose . . . . Everything jelled in my mind when I walked unannounced with the *Newsweek* correspondent into a Vietcong zone. He spoke Vietnamese, and they didn't expect us, so they couldn't prepare a big show for us. And I suddenly realized that the NLF was exactly what the Vietcong experts in the States had said it was . . . . And I came back and said so. They wouldn't let me write it in the paper.

One wonders, incidentally, how many American journalists would be willing to make the same admission. Perhaps the converse of the rigorous cultural radicalism of French culture in the postwar period is a certain willingness to be honest and to admit mistakes that does not sit well in American society. American media culture seems to be governed by two simultaneous if conflicting impulses: the need to impose a left-liberal world view broadly critical of American society and American political traditions, and the need to downplay disagreements or mistakes. In the media culture's world, credibility and face are important, and to admit past errors might reveal the dark secret that journalists are, well, not immune to ideology, a pretense the French are much less likely to maintain.

Another war of the Sixties that played itself out on the French intellectual scene was the 1967 Six Day War in the Middle East. The mortal threat to Israel posed by the Arab states gave rise to massive manifestations of fear—followed, with Israel's victory, by pride—among French Jews. Jean-Paul Aron notes, in retrospect, that he was alarmed by what he saw as the Jews' incipient nationalism, no better than other nationalisms and potentially far more dangerous to its proponents because of the unavoidable dichotomy (as Aron sees it) of all Jewish political feeling, split between allegiance to whatever Diaspora one was living in and loyalty to Israel. In short, he takes the traditional line of many Jews in the Diaspora, that one should not stand out, demonstrate, or otherwise put oneself forward, because it might provoke the Gentiles. He forgets that, in 1967, what Israel was compelled to do in its own defense was necessarily far more provocative than any demonstration by French Jews could ever be. And the Gentiles were, indeed, provoked. De Gaulle, taking the Arab side in another of his insidiously divisive and contentious speeches, referred to the Jews as "an arrogant and domineering people." This caused Raymond Aron to write one of his very few polemical outbursts, a small book in defense of Israel and of the Western interest in its survival.

The Six Day War was soon overshadowed by what the French still call "the events of May 1968." Jean-Paul Aron devotes his longest entry to it, and it appears and reappears frequently in Melinda Porter's interviews. But neither Aron's chronicle nor the scattered remarks in *Through Parisian Eyes* identify the essential components of the uprising. In themselves, the events, the student demonstrations at the new campus of Nanterre and on the Left Bank and, later in the month, the wildcat strikes organized by the socialist and Communist union federations, were not all that dramatic. There was, for instance, no loss of life, nor did civil order really break down outside the sixth arrondissement. Moreover, the student demands were puerile and nonsensical. Those who dismissed the whole episode as an outburst of infantilism and delayed adolescence in a student population that had grown too fast for its own good were not entirely wrong. But there was more to it than that. In May 1968, three dimensions of modern Western and particularly French history fatefully coincided.

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The first dimension had to do with national French politics. De Gaulle had been in power for ten years, ruling France through technocratic ministers like the young Giscard d'Estaing and by a combination of rhetoric and direct appeals to the voters which the Left, not incorrectly, denounced as "plebiscitarian Bonapartism." The smoldering impatience with his rule was, by late 1967, finally bringing about what most had hitherto regarded as totally impossible, namely a reunification, for electoral and domestic policy purposes, of the entire Left —socialist, radical, and Communist. Since the fateful split of the Socialist Party at the Congress of Tours in 1920 which spawned the Communist Party, there had been few more profound enmities in world politics than that between the P.C.F. (the French Communist Party) and the S.F.I.O. (Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière, the old name of the Socialist Party). In early 1968, they were speaking of a coalition, and the demonstrations and general excitement of May gave the unions controlled by the two parties a chance for a dress rehearsal of the new collaboration. The rehearsal worked, and the Union of the Left survived ten years, collapsing finally after its defeat at the general elections of 1978 when François Mitterrand decided that the declining Communist Party was becoming more of a liability than an asset. In the post-de Gaulle period of 1969-78, however, the Union of the Left served the Socialist Party well. In national political terms, therefore, May 1968 had significant consequences.

The second dimension was evident in university and student politics. Early 1968 was, for the radical student leaders and younger members of the faculty, dominated by the fascination with Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the chief organizer of the Nanterre and Left Bank rallies, preached the submersion of the students in the proletariat; yet his leadership was both intellectual and authoritarian. Next to Maoism, the dominant tendency in the universities at the time was the structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser, a Communist intellectual of impeccable Stalinist credentials who decided in the Sixties to prove that all the talk of an early, more humanistic Marx—who, it was said, needed to be rediscovered and reasserted against the later, totalitarian Marx—was wrong. There was but one Marx and one Marxism, and it was scientific and anything but humanistic. Coming to structuralism from the Communist Party, Althusser appropriated the notion that structure determines action and feelings and used it to modernize the archaic dogmas of the class struggle. Althusserianism was tremendously successful and bid fair to take over from literary and anthropological structuralism as the orthodoxy of the Left when the entire Marxist enterprise in Paris was blown sky high, beginning in 1975, by Solzhenitsyn, Kolakowski, and others who arrived from the East. Althusser himself ultimately went mad, killed his wife, and disappeared from circulation in 1983.

The importance of all this, Maoism and Althusserian Marxism, in May 1968 was not that the student leaders or young professors were fired by holy zeal on behalf of the class struggle but, as Aron notes, that they were able to use these ideologies to justify the seizure of social, cultural, and political power by their own class, the intellectual class:

> The events of May 1968 were aimed at nothing less than the solemn ratification of the professorial culture, at the occupation of the ruined edifice by sheep bleating their resentment of modernity. In discussing postwar Franco-American cultural relations I pointed out that the rout of life from thought was inseparable from the rise of the service sector in our growth societies, from the arrival in the student bodies of the children of white-collar workers, of middle managers, and of small-time functionaries. They had complete faith in the *tabula rasa* and no tolerance of any history which might, like a stigma of class, reveal their ancestral burden. The eviction of feeling, the empire of theory guaranteed their fortune.

In other words, Althusser, Lacan, Foucault, Cohn-Bendit, and the others pulled the lev-

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ers to grant themselves power, and the middle- and working-class students, like sheep, followed, believing that they were building a brave new world of total equality, in which there would be no distinctions between teachers and students, old and young, or competent and incompetent. To the extent that both parties in this effort succeeded, the French university collapsed. In the mid-Eighties, it is still struggling to recover. Here again, therefore, we have a legacy of May 1968.

The third dimension, which helps to explain both the sociology and the activism of the uprising, is that of psychology and motivation. Aron does not directly mention it, yet it helps to answer the obvious question of why the students were so angry, so ruthless, and so politically extreme when the society and the power structures in which they found themselves were so mild and benevolent compared to those faced by rebels and dissenters throughout all the rest of human history. The fact is that the oppression turned out to be no oppression at all, that the authoritarian state and university almost instantly conceded most of the students' claims, and that their stone-throwing and barricade-building cost them nothing while gaining them a great deal. Why then the fury, the insistence that they were facing horrors comparable to those of the Third Reich?

The reason, it would appear, was that the students were furious precisely to the extent that their enemies were weak rather than powerful, forgiving rather than repressive. They reproduced in themselves the image of patriarchal intolerance which they did not find in the world around them or, for that matter, in their own families. Althusser, Lacan, and the others became for them ersatz fathers who taught them the oppressive tactics and intellectual coercion that they then wielded against all comers.

To explain why they needed this image of authority when nothing in their society exemplified it would lead us into an examination of the history of the family in the past two centuries, and especially since Freud, for which there is no room here. Very briefly, however, the story is that the Industrial Revolution and changes in work patterns in the nineteenth century removed the father from immediate control of the household. Particularly in the social classes mentioned by Aron as playing a leading role in May 1968, the change led, over four or five generations, to psychological compulsions which demanded compensation for what was lacking in reality, in particular, strong patriarchal authority and ruthless consistency. From this perspective, the throngs of May 1968 were to a large extent following psychological compulsions laid down by the fundamental social constraints of modern history.

After the high point of 1968 the influence and power of the "moderns" declined in French culture at large even as they consolidated their hold on the universities. New, more ephemeral concerns replaced Althusserian seriousness: pro-Palestinianism, radical feminism, semiotics, various ideologies of filmmaking, and, a particularly Parisian problem, the legitimacy or illegitimacy of male fashions in an age of sexual egalitarianism. These are the issues addressed by most of the figures interviewed in Melinda Porter's book, which is why, unlike *Les Modernes,* it is of marginal interest or importance, especially if one wants to understand the secular forces of French culture and history. As Porter herself points out, "Paris has the beauty and the life that lures her artists away from their work." The result, at least for some, is a lack of seriousness that constantly evades the real issues and the profounder questions.

In point of fact, though, while it is difficult to do serious and sustained intellectual work in the Paris of the "moderns," it is far from impossible. Raymond Aron wrote his major works, as well as countless essays and speeches, while providing a weekly column for *Le Figaro.* Partly as a consequence of his endeavors, the culture of the "moderns" collapsed in the late Seventies. What was left was, in part, the residual interests of indi-

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vidual figures among the "moderns" such as Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, or Regis Debray, an incorrigible Third-Worldist radical who, in 1981, became special advisor to François Mitterrand. But there also re-emerged an anti-Left counterculture which had been hidden, but not destroyed, in the years of the radical hegemony. This counterculture followed no single guide and its representatives displayed a variety of motivations and interests. In the field of political analysis there was, of course, Raymond Aron himself, whose views are finally, after his death, accepted virtually across the political spectrum in France as the starting point of all serious thought about international politics, military strategy, and modern history. In the study of Marxism, there was the Greek-born Kostas Papaioannou, a close friend of Raymond Aron and of the Mexican poet Octavio Paz. Papaioannou, who died prematurely in 1982, was a polymath capable of writing with equal discernment on Communist ideology and Byzantine art, and his recently re-published essays provide an introduction to modern Marxism and its political significance arguably far superior to anything Sartre or his epigones ever wrote or will write.[3] In 1967, at the height of the radical hegemony, Papaioannou coined the phrase "cold ideology" to describe the Marxism that remains as a technique of power and a system of discipline and terror in Communist states long after anyone had ceased to "believe" its tenets. The notion that subjective belief is irrelevant to the power and the operation of Communist ideology is absolutely crucial to our understanding its persistence in the modern world; the full implications of this insight have by no means yet been understood in the West.

Jean-Paul Aron, and to a lesser extent Melinda Camber Porter, have done us a service by presenting us with the views of those who set the agenda and determined what was important and what was not, and what was politically correct, in Paris from around 1944 to around 1970. Reading these books and meditating on the monstrous inanities propounded by the cultural radicals, however, one is more than ever convinced that the really interesting cultural history of France since 1944, or even since the Revolution, remains to be written. The lasting, the characteristic, contributions of French philosophers, historians, critics, and writers to modern culture are not those of Sartre, Barthes, Foucault, Althusser, or even Lévi-Strauss, most of whose reputations are already shrinking. Their problem was that in their determination to undermine, debunk, and denigrate, they failed to provide any positive vision of art, philosophy, or literature. Moreover, their very ideology militated against the sustained study of particular institutions, ideas, or works of art. None of the figures described by Jean-Paul Aron ever produced anything like the essays of Papaioannou, the studies in comparative mythology of Mircea Eliade and Georges Dumézil, the explanations of the origins of ideology of Louis Dumont, or the theology and religious philosophies of Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson. It is figures like these who have made the genuine contributions to understanding and wisdom, and not the cultural radicals. Not even, despite Raymond Aron's polite words, Jean-Paul Sartre, whose ideas did so much to shape the image of this period and the minds of its most influential representatives.

3 *De Marx et du marxisme,* by Kostas Papaioannou, was published by Gallimard in 1983.

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Remembering Mischa Elman

by Dana Mack

A man saw the whole world as a grinning skull and crossbones. The rose flesh of life shriveled from all faces. Nothing counts. Everything is a fake. Dust to dust and ashes to ashes and then an old darkness and a useless silence. So he saw it all. Then he went to a Mischa Elman concert. Two hours waves of sound beat on his eardrums. Music washed something or other inside him. Music broke down and rebuilt something or other in his head and heart. He joined in five encores for the young Russian Jew with the fiddle. When he got outside his heels hit the sidewalk in a new way. He was the same man in the same world as before. Only there was a singing fire and a climb of roses everlastingly over the world he looked on.

—Carl Sandburg, "Bath"

The idea of writing about the violinist Mischa Elman first struck me a year ago March, a few weeks after the birth of my daughter, Nadia. Nadia is my first child, and is his fourth great-grandchild, though sadly he did not live to see her. That she resembled him—unremarkable, since all bald, blue-eyed babies resemble him—had less to do with this particular inspiration than the simple fact that giving birth calls up memories of those whom one has loved. Especially in my case—orphaned early and married late—a cycle had to complete itself before I could gather my memories and pick up the pen.

My daughter is three generations removed from a musical talent so prodigious that during the first two decades of this century it took the world by storm. It was compared to Mozart's and Liszt's in their childhoods and described variously as "Parsifal-like," "a riddle which no sage can solve," "a wonderful, impenetrable mystery." Upon hearing the twelve-year-old Elman play, audiences were said to have fallen to helpless weeping. Musicians four and five times his age gathered the pale, slight creature in their arms and covered his face with kisses. On November 10, 1904, a music critic of the *Hamburger Nachrichten* proclaimed, "Mischa Elman stands the natural order of things on its head: a child with the intelligence of a man, with the soul of an artist, knowing all the pain and joy of life!" Seldom was a child so loved, so admired, so worshiped as an example of divine beneficence, of destiny, of hope. God—so goes the old Jewish saying—had whispered in his ear.

My grandfather grew up to fulfill a good portion of his promise. In 1964, in the same city where the *Deutsche Musiker-Zeitung* had first called the music world's "attention to this outstanding genius" sixty years before, Elman's playing was still hailed as the "perfection of the art."[1] Even if there was never really any question of his being a second Mozart, or even a second Liszt—one must discount for the occasional hyperbole

1 Quotations are from the *Deutsche Musiker-Zeitung,* October 29, 1904, and the *Tagesspiegel,* December 11, 1964, respectively.

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of late-romantic music enthusiasts—his gifts were indeed tremendous. By contrast, the exaggerated claims made on behalf of musical artists today seem almost like willful fabrications.

By the time Elman died—in 1967, at the age of seventy-six—the music world had changed considerably. The label "genius" was being attached to people whose most conspicuous quality was their artistic shallowness if not their short-lived success. The gift which distinguishes artist from craftsman, the inspiration which transfigures mere technical dexterity into artistic beauty, was rarely to be seen, even as "artists" and "the arts" were ubiquitous.

My grandfather was accused of being bitter when, near the end of his life, he declared, "We are living in an age in which only the standard of mediocrity has been raised." Naturally he was bitter. He had been unable in his old age to maintain the stunning popularity of his youth. But his acrid assessments of contemporary cultural life were often on the mark. Asked by the press his opinion of Lincoln Center when it first opened in 1965, he called it "a shopping center for the arts." In the family circle he was bound to add with a chuckle, "If one hall is sold out, you need only walk across the plaza."

In fact, his vision was too sanguine. At least in a shopping center one can expect a choice. At Lincoln Center, the same music is performed night after night in the same slick way by the same people. Considering my grandfather's reaction to Lincoln Center, I sometimes wonder what he would have said upon seeing James Galway's or Itzhak Perlman's ingenuous face peering out from the television screen, asking, "Do you know me?" Indeed, he could never have foreseen the vulgarity that characterizes the mainstream cultural scene today, and the embarrassment over high art which permeates the media, from American Express advertisements to the movie *Amadeus,* which somehow attempted to equate flatulence and a punk hairdo with a music of transcendent beauty.

My grandfather was all too aware of the precious distinctions between an artist's life and his work, and he made these distinctions in statements to the press and in his own writings on music. But such trivialization of art was not his only gripe with the modern music scene. He decried the increasing politicization of cultural life, so obvious in the "cultural exchanges" that are regularly a part of East-West relations. He lamented the careerism of young musicians who submitted themselves at tender ages to the spurious judgments of competition juries. He deplored the sacrifice of artistic principles to marketing decisions.

This, too, is hardly surprising, since Elman suffered from many of these things. To the detriment of his career, he refused to concertize in the Soviet Union, though he was pressed to do so. His life story provided no fodder for the scandal-loving public, so his biography—a touching memoir written by his father—never found a publisher, even at the height of his career. And in the 1950s, RCA, for whom Elman had sold around two million records, restricted the choice of music he could record. As a result, he went over to Vanguard, a smaller and less well-known label. Although Elman's return to Berlin in 1964, after an absence of more than thirty years, created much musical excitement, it could not rescue his recorded legacy there. The peculiar limitations of record marketing in West Germany have made his recordings virtually unavailable today.

My grandfather suffered most, however, from the problems of public image which often haunt artists who have been around a long time. In his later years, people tended to treat him as a legend, and to confuse his persona with his playing. One of his more generous colleagues dismissed Elman's notorious irascibility with the assertion, "He is like a good, old wine." This statement was appropriate to Elman the musician, not Elman the man. For anyone who really knew my grandfather the simile was an odd one. Mischa Elman the man did not go down very easily!

Indeed, my grandfather was temperamental enough in both his personal and profes-

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sional dealings to have caused offense. Determined, proud, opinionated on most every subject—but especially on the subject of politics—he made enemies. But if the social man was excitable, the artist showed a profound control, a spiritual refinement in performance that suggested a deep inner peace. I was reminded of those qualities one Saturday afternoon a few months ago, when my husband put on a phonograph record he thought might arouse my interest and draw me away from the typewriter. The recording was of the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto. I have to admit that I did not recognize the playing as Elman's (I had not listened to a performance of his for eighteen years); but I thought it was the most beautiful interpretation of that well-worn concerto that I had ever heard.

What most struck me about the recording—made with the Boston Symphony in the 1950s—was the reserve and consummate elegance of the playing, its fine texture, its inwardness, and its technical mastery. Unfortunately, Elman's playing is remembered today for qualities quite different from these: for its sentiment and passion, and for the romantic liberties he took with the music in his early career.

Indeed, in the nineteen years since his death, I have heard my grandfather talked about countless times, always with great respect, but always with a certain nostalgia. He is placed in a context of "those days," when musicians played "in that style." Most musicians—including my contemporaries who confess to hoarding "those old 78s of old Elman"—view Elman very much as Murray Schumach did when he wrote, in *The New York Times,* that in seventy-five years Elman had "whipped up more emotion with a G string than all of Minsky's burlesque queens combined."[2] There is a strong implication here—as in other discussions of Elman—that he was an entertainer, not a serious artist.

So stubborn was the legendary reputation of my grandfather as a "natural" who allowed himself the musical liberties befitting romantic genius that even my parents believed it, and they transmitted it to me. The idea that he had a personal statement to make through his music—and that therefore I, a blood descendant, must have that same gift—was very much alive in my childhood. And so was the peculiar conception that art was something spontaneous, that it could be achieved without work.

Today I am convinced that at least part of the reason I began to take my own piano study seriously only as late as the age of sixteen is that my grandfather's work ethic—so important to his music-making—was so generally overlooked. In my collection of press clippings there are several photographs of Elman accompanied by ridiculous captions on the order of "After sixty years, he still practices." Even allowing for the inanities of publicity agents, such declarations strike me as symptomatic of a failure to acknowledge the drastic changes that Elman brought about in his playing over the years. Not only did he practice, he was a demon for critical stylistic evaluation.

When I finally did settle down to practice, I profited enormously from the instruction of my two great-aunts, Liza and Esther Elman, who were accomplished musicians in their own right. Studying piano with them made me realize that practice brings with it not only change but humility. Surprisingly, my aunts' playing was pristine and meticulous. It revealed a modest dedication to the music, and it exposed once and for all the myth of the Elmans as untamed natural talents.

My close association with these women in my young-adult years, along with the sensitive guidance of other piano teachers, enlightened me as to the realities of a musical career. It made me realize that the first responsibility of a musician is to the music, not to whatever talent he might possess, much less to some idea of "family talent." And it made me doubt, for the first time, the popular view that my grandfather's career

2 "Elman 'Is Like a Good, Old Wine,'" by Murray Schumach; *The New York Times,* June 26, 1966, p. D13.

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floundered solely because of the stylistic change in violin playing brought about by the arrival of Jascha Heifetz on the musical scene—the emphasis upon technical perfection and musical conformity which parade as authenticity of style in musical performance.

To listen to Elman's later recordings, even of Bach and Vivaldi, is to discover that his playing is far from inauthentic. His Bach has a delicacy and refinement perfectly appropriate to the Baroque style. What it lacks, of course, is the anachronistic driving tempo of most modern performances—the hardness, the lack of repose, the relentless attack that characterizes so much string-playing today. At any rate, I am quite prepared to defend Elman's playing against accusations that it was *démodé* or intransigent, but this is not the point upon which I would consider it appropriate to dwell. It interests me more that his views of musical life can be characterized in exactly such terms. In this light, some of the facts of my grandfather's early life bear recounting.

Mischa Elman was born on January 20, 1891 in Talnoy, a small village of the Ukraine, the son of a Hebrew scholar. His father, Saul Elman, claimed a rather ambiguous heritage. Saul's own grandfather had been a devoutly religious man and a Talmudic scholar of some renown who toward the end of his life had taken to performing as a *badchen,* or jester, at village weddings. Thus did my great-great-grandfather, Saul's father, come into contact with cantors and musicians who encouraged his talent for music.

As a self-taught violinist, Saul's father became such a local celebrity that the neighboring landowners of Uman, where he had settled, hired him to play at banquets. This was an unheard-of honor for a Jewish musician; even so, he never earned the social distinction his talents merited. As late as the turn of the century, musicians had no more status than artisans in the Russian-Jewish ghetto. My great-great-grandfather's social descent so embittered him that he forbade his son Saul to play with the children of other musicians, and discouraged his musical propensities.

When Saul married and went to Talnoy, he greatly missed the music of his father's orchestra. In his own words:

> I began to feel and suffer some of that passionate wistful yearning which was to communicate itself to the world through . . . my unborn son. My desire to play became unbearable. I wrote to my father, begging him to send me one of the violins which he usually kept for sale, pretending that I had a customer for it. On its arrival I exultantly took the instrument and began to play it. Then a strange thing happened! I caught sight of myself in the mirror—a hateful reflection! A musician! I never touched the bow again, but used the violin like a guitar, playing it by passing my fingers over the strings. It seemed more respectable.[3]

Against such a background it is easy to understand that my grandfather's own musical inclinations were anything but encouraged in his early childhood. Curiously enough, however, Mischa's first musical impressions helped to determine his future, for he claimed to remember his grandfather's tone on the G string, and the old man had died when the boy was only two years old.

By four years of age, Mischa's fascination with the violin was so pronounced that it very nearly cost him his health. With the violin forbidden to him and hidden from sight in a cupboard, Mischa took to playing it secretly. But his clumsy attempts to reproduce melodies on an instrument as big as himself frustrated him so that he stopped eating and refused to play with his toys. Indeed, he could barely sleep. When the source of his restlessness was discovered, my great-grandfather gave him a small instrument. It did not take long for the child to secure himself some local fame.

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3 All of Saul Elman's quotations are from *Memoirs of Mischa Elman's Father,* privately published by Saul Elman in 1933.

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Naturally, the opportunities for music study in the Ukrainian provinces were limited at best, and hardly available to such a poor family as the Elmans. Ironically, it was the Massacre of Schpola, just one of the many hideous pogroms perpetrated on Russian-Jewish communities around the turn of the century, that brought little Mischa to the notice of his first patroness, the Countess Urusova.

Countess Urusova was the landowner of Schpola, the village where Saul Elman had settled as a Hebrew schoolmaster. Called back from Paris on the heels of the pogrom —ostensibly to investigate the murder and pillage—she contented herself with the explanations of her estate manager, one of the organizers of these gruesome Easter festivities. She refused to admit a communal delegation of Jews who came to appeal, and apparently even helped to spread the rumor that the Jews themselves were somehow responsible for the pogrom. In general, the fate of Schpola's Jews did not interest her.

What did interest her were reports of a newly discovered Jewish five-year-old violin prodigy. No sooner had she settled the graver matter to her satisfaction than she summoned the boy and his father. A wave of excitement spread over the Jewish community at this news. But if the hopes of Schpola's Jewry were now pinned upon the Elmans' success with the Countess, they were to be disappointed. Upon hearing Mischa play, the Countess was not inspired to noble thoughts concerning the welfare of his people. Far from it. "Mr. Elman," she exclaimed, addressing Mischa's father, "you possess a treasure. Sell him to me! Name a price!"

Today, it is hard for us to imagine a social system so backward and cruel as to countenance the sale of a child by a parent for the benefit of public display. If *Wunderkinder* are today turned into profit, it happens differently. It happens under parental control. In my great-grandfather's memoirs he conveys the terror that struck his heart at this offer to buy his son—an offer which he refused to consider even though it might mean the end of his hopes for the child. His answer to the Countess was more than a profession of parental love; it was an assertion of sovereignty over his son. "You are rich enough, Madame," Saul replied. "You have plenty without my boy, whereas he is my only treasure."

I can remember my grandfather being very critical, in general, of stage parents. Indeed, he was wont to introduce a young piano prodigy of his acquaintance and her shadow as "Ruth and her father, Ruthless." But for his own father he had only praise and respect. Though for all intents and purposes the family lived off Mischa's talent from his fifth year on, he never seems to have felt exploited. The reasons for this probably lie more in the circumstances of his early life and in his father's affectionate character than in his ultimate success.

The situation of East European Jewry at this time—however charmingly rendered in its literature—was in fact life-threatening. By the turn of the century, forty percent of Russian Jewry was dependent upon charity. The effect of the 1882 "May Laws"—which forbade any Jew to resettle in a rural area and which provided the legal basis for mass expulsions—was devastating. The object of the government's policy was most succinctly expressed by Constantin Pobedonostsev, the chief Procurator of the Holy Synod in St. Petersburg from 1880 to 1905, who stated to a petitioning Jewish organization: "One third [of the Jews] will die out, one third will leave the country, and one third will be completely dissolved in the surrounding population."

This hopeless state of affairs made Jews willing to sacrifice almost anything for a chance to escape—anything but their ties to the Jewish community and its way of life. And these ties proved to be strong. For the Elmans, any success for Mischa was contingent on his being able to enter the milieu of high culture without paying the price of total assimilation.

Saul Elman was a mild-mannered man of intellectual bent, candid, and a bit naïve in

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the ways of the world. His destiny, his life's work, as he saw it, was as the protector of his son's talent. Curiously enough, this single-minded devotion to the cause of Mischa's welfare imbued him with a daring he seemed not to have otherwise possessed. "I am the father," he writes early in his memoirs,

> of one whom the world has acclaimed a violin genius. The whence and how of that hidden spark which . . . burst into flame, the tragedies and the comedies inseparable from any definite success in wresting from life her rewards, are all a part of the strange story I am now going to tell. It is the story of my dedication, for I am . . . a dedicated man blessed with the rare fate of having lived to see the realization of my dream . . . .

When Countess Urusova eventually offered simply to sponsor Mischa, providing him with a private tutor and a music teacher, Saul agreed only under the condition that "all the lessons be given under my personal supervision . . . that under no circumstances would I leave Mischa under her control."

If the music master turned out an elusive character (he rarely showed up for lessons, and was so stymied by Mischa's talent that he hardly allowed the child to play, preferring to talk through the few lessons he gave), Saul saw no reason to express any objections. Mischa's musical development seemed not to suffer from lack of formal instruction beyond what Saul himself could provide. Moreover, the boy took to his schoolwork and picked up Russian from his classmate, the Countess's son.

It was not long, however, before tensions resumed between Saul and the Countess. Urusova took it upon herself to arrange a recital, the proceeds from which, she determined, would go to the Elman family. The idea was generous enough, but its execution was rather clumsy. Naturally, Jews were to be barred from the performance. This stipulation caused my great-grandfather considerable anguish. He had no alternative but to allow the child to play, of course, so he resigned himself to a rather unconvincing display of passive resistance. When, at the concert's end, the Countess swept Mischa in her arms and carried him through the room to receive the congratulations of the local dignitaries, my great-grandfather followed:

> Here was my opportunity to show these people that . . . the object of their admiration was the child of an ordinary Jew, one of those who were outrageously excluded . . . . I followed in her footsteps up to the end of the aisle and whenever she stopped to introduce the child, I managed to be close by. Throughout all this march I did not utter a single word. I just trailed after her, a silent protest against the injustice done to the Jews of Schpola.

That same night, his pride wounded and fearing that "there would come a time when the wealth and grandeur of the palace would hold out greater attractions to the boy than his father's home," Saul decided to resettle in Odessa. Faced with the news of the Elmans' imminent departure, the Countess commented, rather perceptively: "Well, Mr. Elman, I understand you thoroughly. You do not want to accept help from me, probably because I am a Christian."

I wonder sometimes at that merciful natural law which determines a parent's irrational conviction that, whatever his own shortcomings, only he is truly capable of overseeing his child's development. Saul Elman's memoirs are nothing if not an apology for his role as ambitious father, and it is in this spirit that he writes of my grandfather's period of study in Odessa: "The calmer judgment of years has tempered considerably my irritation and mistrust of the men in charge of the Odessa Academy."

His irritation may have been tempered, but it is difficult to glean from his memoirs the facts of the Odessa period. An objective account might go something like this: At great risk to himself and his family, the father heads for Odessa, and after a series of mishaps enrolls his gifted son as a scholarship student at the Music Academy, even managing to procure a stipend for the fami-

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ly's welfare. The faculty of this institution is thrilled to have a prodigy on their hands, and wishes him to study there as long as possible. In order to achieve this goal, the faculty plans to display the child publicly at decent intervals, but not to push him onto the concert stage. This irritates the indigent father, for whom time is of the essence. He does not disdain parading the child before every visiting artist who passes through town; he even goes so far as to request from these artists written witness of their wonderment. Five years pass during which the father constantly mixes in at the Academy. The faculty determines to break his pride by testing the child's limits.

It is exam time. Everyone has been assigned his etude but little Mischa. Mischa is sent to his teacher, Alexander Fiedemann, to ask why he has not been told what he is to play. Fiedemann answers, "Why hurry? One or two days' preparation will be sufficient for you . . . . According to your father, you have the greatest talent the world has ever seen." Hearing this, the father becomes indignant. The faculty becomes more indignant. To top it off, with practically no time to prepare for his exam, little Mischa's limits are reached.

Thus my grandfather flunked out of the Odessa Music Academy.

What was to be done? Saul, having supported a growing family on a stipend provided by the school, quickly arranged a concert tour of the neighboring cities, a tour which he rightly thought would be successful enough to generate some funds for the future and to embarrass the Academy. Returning to Odessa, he found he would be able to reinstate Mischa as a student, but only on the condition that he commit Mischa to five more years of study and forego the family's stipend. Apparently a rumor had been circulating that Saul was cruelly exploiting the boy for his own selfish ends by taking him on long, exacting concert tours.

At this point my great-grandfather took the only step open to him. At the first opportunity, he presented his son to Leopold Auer, the famous professor at the music conservatory in St. Petersburg. The grand old violinist had visited the Odessa Academy, where he had heard Mischa play. His enthusiastic assessment of the boy, however, had been kept from Saul, who only learned of it through reports from friends. But even when Saul knew that Auer would take Mischa into his class, he had not been eager to pursue the matter. First, St. Petersburg did not welcome Jews. Second, Auer was himself an apostate Jew who had earned a reputation as an anti-Semite bound to convert his Jewish students to Russian Orthodoxy.

As things turned out, Saul had nothing to worry about. Indeed, he later wondered why he had waited so long before bringing Mischa to Auer. Under the master's guidance—and in the space of two years—Mischa was assured a position in the front rank of violinists. Evidently Auer found a perfect balance between discipline and encouragement, between the needs of a prodigious talent for guidance and the ambitions of an anxious father. He proved himself, indeed, the finest of human beings and the most generous also, both in his personal and in his artistic relations. Elman's Amati violin was a gift from his teacher; on one occasion Auer feigned illness in order that Mischa might be given a chance to play for an especially prestigious music society.

But the move to St. Petersburg in January of 1903, with all the positive implications for Mischa's career, was far from easy. Having settled Mischa with Auer, Saul still had to overcome the difficulties of securing for himself and his family a situation near the object of their pride. As a student of the conservatory, Mischa automatically enjoyed right of domicile in St. Petersburg, but Saul's permit of residence was temporary, and unless he was willing to go underground there was a good chance he would be separated from his son.

For a Jew to obtain the right of permanent residence in St. Petersburg required either the exertion of influence or a combination of bribery and extortion. Preferring the first, Saul filed a petition with none

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other than Prime Minister Von Phleve—the man who, if it had not been for Hitler, might have gone down in history as this century's most sinister enemy of the Jews. In this petition, Saul had the support of the Chief of the Russian Police, Lopuchin, as well as of the dignitaries of the conservatory.

While his petition was still pending in Von Phleve's office, Saul's temporary residence permit expired. He was able to arrange with a prominent Zionist, one Dr. Tuvim, to be registered as a butler. This solution was far from comfortable. While it meant not having to *go* underground during this period of residence purgatory, it meant having to *live* underground. For Tuvim's apartment was barely big enough to accommodate his own family; the only bed he could offer Saul was in his house cellar, a home which Saul was to share with a "drunken, desperate crowd of servants and laborers . . . [whose] breakfast consisted mainly of vodka and obscenity . . . ."

For two months Saul holed up in Tuvim's cellar by night, and haunted the halls of the ministry by day, consorting, in his words, with the "scrap-heap of officialdom." With the help of a few tips from Lopuchin, he was able to avoid the police and make friends with the lazy bureaucrats who occupied the offices of the Russian cabinet. But to no avail. His first petition was refused.

In this matter, even Auer could be of no help. Requesting a personal interview with Von Phleve, Auer appealed the decision on the grounds that such a talent as Mischa's should not be lost to Russia. He was met with a tirade on the impertinence of the Jews, who, incidentally, made up approximately fifty percent of the conservatory's student body.

It was Lopuchin who saved the day by suggesting that he himself arrange a musical soirée at which the Prime Minister and his cabinet would be present. Unaware of the fact that the violinist there was "the one on behalf of whose father he was continually being pestered," Von Phleve declared himself impressed by the boy's talent. The next day, his secretary presented the minister with a new petition. As Saul tells it:

> "What sort of petition is this?" he growled . . . .
>
> "This is the petition of the father of the child whom you heard last night at Lopuchin's," said the secretary. "The man is asking the right of residence so that he may look after his child, who is too young to remain here alone. We also have a petition asking for the whole family, but that you refused."
>
> "Oh, is this the child?" marveled Von Phleve. "He is certainly a wonder. Well, in that case we will let the poor boy have his father and his mother with him."

According to my great-grandfather, the news of Von Phleve's change of heart created a sensation in St. Petersburg, where he was regarded as a man of steel. Evidently, Mischa's music had touched the heart of the villain who engineered nothing less than the forced resettlement of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian Jews—not to mention the widespread murder of thousands.

I relate these events not because they sound so conveniently like the stuff of show business apocrypha, but because they are essential to an understanding of a cultural world that is long extinct. Few political leaders today, no matter how autocratic, would have the confidence to make such sovereign artistic judgments. One is reminded of the story of John Kennedy, who, when receiving Igor Stravinsky at the White House, turned to his wife and asked, "Jackie, is he really as great as they say he is?"

If it is in bad taste to suggest that a man as evil as Von Phleve could for some moments of his life enter that heavenly realm which encompasses the genuine, soul-penetrating experience of music, so be it. Perhaps it is some comfort to know that my grandfather was lucky enough to *live* in that heaven. From the situations of these two very different men in regard to music one can draw no moral conclusions. There is no inherent goodness in art, though there may be greatness in it.

On the occasion of his Berlin debut, at the age of twelve, my grandfather arrived late

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and shaken, barely revived from nearly having been asphyxiated in a dank hotel room where a gas jet had leaked. That he triumphed in the face of such odds is mysterious only insofar as his singular dedication to music was a mystery. A man must be born as well as educated to such a moment; he must have the capacity to see beyond his immediate circumstances and to capture with his inner eye the elusive vision of an artistic idea.

That is not to say that great artists are assured great careers. Such careers have much to do with friendly coincidence. Having conquered Berlin, Hamburg, and Vienna in 1904, Elman went on to make successful debuts in London, where he enjoyed the notice of Edward VII, and to penetrate the closed music world of Paris. But such achievements were not enough security for nervous American agents who, while paying lip service to the idea that Mischa should set out for the New World, were, in Saul's words, "reluctant to run the risk of introducing a wonder child to their skeptical countrymen."

It was Madame Melba who acted as the *deus ex machina* for my grandfather's first American tour. She arranged a music benefit for Italy's indigent at which, among others, Caruso was to sing. For her own contribution, an *Ave Maria,* she asked Mischa to play *obbligato.* In the audience on the night of the performance sat Oscar Hammerstein, who the next day engaged the boy for a series of Sunday concerts at his Manhattan Opera House.

Once back in the States, Hammerstein launched a publicity campaign which all but guaranteed my grandfather's success. This was a time, perhaps the only time in our history, when it was possible to develop a mass audience for serious music in this country. Audiences were not yet diverted by the popular forms of music that have since evolved. Such newly ripe publicity tools as a mass press introduced personages of unusual sophistication to an open-minded public.

If my grandfather's debut in New York on December 10, 1908 marked his own coming of age (he wore a dress suit for the first time), it also marked an important moment in the development of the American musical public, whose early relationship with Elman could be described in terms of young love. Audiences could not resist the intensity and the vitality of his playing, and they were eager to hear more of it on record. As Boris Schwarz points out in *Great Masters of the Violin,* Elman had a "luscious . . . burnished tone [which] reproduced most beautifully on discs."

Indeed, my grandfather, who was no friend of modern music, was ideally suited to be a part of the natural dissemination of the standard and light classics that resulted from the advent of recordings. Elman made many records in that industry's budding years, and that meant that as a performer he was reaching people who had previously been all but closeted away from mainstream musical life. In fact, it was on the strength of his reputation as a recording artist that Elman was able to embark upon lengthy concert tours that interspersed major-orchestra appearances with recitals in small towns.

Such extended concert tours as those which Elman made in the first decades of this century would be impossible today. For one thing, virtuosi are loath to play light pieces on the same program with music of more lasting significance; the idea of "responsibility" to a monolithic, self-contained musical repertory has taken over since Elman's day. For another, even the most famous classical recording artists today do not enjoy the type of fame that Elman once did—at least I have not heard of a classical musician in the past forty years or so being chased by fans tearing at his clothes.

In the days of slow train travel my grandfather's excursions into uncharted territory were an unusual phenomenon, and it was his love of playing, more than anything else, that was responsible for them. My grandfather cared little about how many showed up for these small musical events, nor did he particularly care if the financial rewards were modest. (In places where he could not be assured a large audience he evidently

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arranged recitals on the basis of percentage contract.) I recently read that he gave a free private recital in Fargo, North Dakota—for an audience of two! Apparently, a married couple arrived too late for his concert, having travelled for thirteen hours through a blizzard. Elman heard about this and the next morning invited them to his hotel, where he played through his program for them.

Nothing was more disturbing to my grandfather than having to cancel a performance. One of the great disappointments of his career was the night of Kennedy's inauguration. Engaged on his own seventieth birthday to play for the new president, my grandfather found himself unable to cross the paralyzed, snow-covered town of Washington to the concert hall where the president waited. Though Elman later made good on his promise to play for Kennedy—at a White House press dinner sometime afterward—he often related the story, both publicly and privately, as if he could not believe the Fates to be so cruel.

Where much less distinguished appearances were concerned, Elman could endure hardships that would have put off others. He walked the streets of Caracas, Venezuela, for one whole night in the Thirties, for fear of lying down on the uninviting bed in his hotel room. Advised by his doctor during that same South American tour not to risk a flight over the Andes (the plane was not pressurized), he crossed on a burro. My grandmother used to tease him about her predicament as a travelling artist's wife. One family joke was her habit of packing a bottle of Lysol when they embarked on a tour.

But the rewards of travelling long, arduous distances were considerable. Elman could claim, for example, to be one of the first Western artists to tour Japan, which he did as early as 1921. At a time when the Far East was just beginning to open up to European cultural influence, he had an enormous impact upon Japanese musical life. For their part, the Japanese have not forgotten his contribution. They have released at least one RCA Gold Seal LP transfer of his earlier playing.

I have always been of the opinion that Elman enjoyed being on the road as much as he enjoyed concertizing. There was something of the gypsy in him, even if he lived his private life by a strict bourgeois code. I cannot count the times when, as a child, I accompanied him on car trips to the trailer parks which dotted the San Francisco Bay Area. These were family outings, and since my grandfather did not drive, my grandmother, mother, or father served as chauffeur. Of course, no one understood Elman's fascination with the mobile home, and, with the exception of my sister, we were all bored by it. But as with all my grandfather's eccentricities, this one was indulged in a spirit of goodwill and with respect for his position as head of the family and renowned artist.

Our trailer-park excursions were little rituals. Once we had arrived on the site, the driver would be requested to slow down and make the complete rounds. My grandfather's nose and glasses pressed upon the door window, he would peer and ruminate. What was this one like inside? That one looks large enough to be comfortable. How long would one stay in the park? How much would such a thing cost? Might such a thing be rented? I often wondered what on earth my grandfather would do were he ever to find himself living in a trailer park, and whether he appreciated how very little he might have in common with his neighbors there.

Once or twice we found a trailer for sale, and the opportunity for inspection was duly availed, much to grandfather's excitement. Seeing the inside of a trailer only served to increase his desire to live in one. A few years before he died, the opportunity presented itself. My grandparents were invited by some acquaintances, owners of a mobile home, to take a short trip. If my memory serves me correctly, the journey was a profound disappointment. Having ensconced themselves in the house on wheels, the Elmans had not even reached the city limits before they had had enough. Apparently traffic gridlock had assumed no part in my grandfather's fantasies, which were undoubtedly of the open road.

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Like most exceptional people of his generation, especially those who came from modest backgrounds, Elman felt a deep respect for the simple life and for those who led it—he even harbored a longing occasionally to merge in their ranks. But his daily outings among the people—although they satisfied some yearning for normalcy, some need to justify his inveterate "New Deal" politics—revealed but ephemeral reflections of this *faiblesse*. The meaning of the word incognito was unknown to him; wherever he was, he was likely to be conspicuous. If he ordered sand dabs in a fish restaurant, it was all too clear to the waiter what sort of sand dabs were to be brought—namely, sand dabs for Mischa Elman!

My grandfather never learned that one does not send the food back at the Hippo Burger, nor does one attract the waiter's attention by snapping the fingers, nor does one address him as "*garçon.*" He never learned that one does not request china and a cloth napkin at a California barbecue where "sticky chicken" is the main dish.

Of the more memorable incidents of my childhood, one concerns a visit to the Japanese Tea Garden in San Francisco. The charms of this spot were not lost upon my grandfather, for whom afternoon tea was in any case a *sine qua non* of the day, and it was the only place where he ever deigned to drink tea from a cup. (He generally insisted upon drinking it from a glass, in the Russian style.) We went to the Tea Garden at least once during the concert season if he happened to be passing through San Francisco, and once or twice during the summers, when my grandparents habitually rented a home on the peninsula.

One fine day, we were requested by the waitress to pay as she served us. The delicate, kimono-clad lady, her simple request delivered in very broken English, inspired from my grandfather an interrogation the likes of which she could never have expected in her homeland, and for which her linguistic gifts were insufficient. To all the rhetorical variations on the theme, "What is the meaning of this," she had no answer. In response to the protests—"I have come here since . . . and never have I been asked . . . you cannot tell me that you believe I will walk away without paying . . . do you believe such a thing, that I would not pay . . . we have not drunk our tea yet . . . no, no, you must come back . . . I will not pay now"—she smiled and repeated unflinchingly, "Please sir, pay . . . now!" In reply to his waving dismissal of the hand she stood firm. It was the only argument I ever saw my grandfather lose. Having lost, he directed some considerable argument at me.

I was not one to shirk a good debate with Elman, and my mother remarked more than once upon my nerve, saying that I was the only family member from whom he entertained argument. In fact, I was the only family member who offered it. Others, when confronted with his demanding queries, were more reserved. I always thought this odd. No one could have been more demanding or self-assured than he, but nobody was blessed at heart with a better, kinder nature, or keener sense of humor. As a raconteur, he had no competition—and not because he was invariably the most important person in the company. Nobody took more pleasure in telling a story against himself than my grandfather did; and with each fresh telling of the same story he delighted himself anew, often repeating punch lines twice, and chuckling harder the second time than the first, as if the whole thing were new.

As for my courage in his presence, I was young and ingenuous enough to think that he could benefit from some insight into the ins and outs of provincial California life. It was not that I felt ashamed of his decidedly old-European ways, or of his fame. On the contrary, I relished the fact that he was different, and savored any taste of glory which happened to fall my way in the form of family publicity.

But I was too self-absorbed to live in his shadow within the family circle. And because I knew that, where I was concerned, he had a civilizing mission, I was determined also to have one. I do not regret my valiant defenses of open midriffs, white lipstick, and my mother's occasional after-dinner cigarette,

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or of a young German friend of my parents' who obviously had taken no part in the Hitler regime. But when I think of the time I wasted defending the Beatles when I could have been practicing Beethoven, I am sad. And I wonder at his patience.

Perhaps because my grandfather had had no real youth, he was prepared to indulge mine. More likely, I had for him some redeeming qualities. One of these was that my greatest pleasure was to entertain him with imitations of famous actors, musical-comedy stars, musicians, and his own lovably eccentric retinue. I was always good for a repeat performance on request, and he often laughed until he wept.

Of course, all of this—the ready argument, the ready entertainment—was a diversion tactic. The painful subject of piano practice loomed threateningly over our every moment together. As early as five years of age, I learned to deflect attention from the subject. As I grew older, I began to regard my polemical position as much improved if I had an hour or two of practice behind me. (It is a strange conception that remains with me to this day.) There were, in fact, days when my stomach and my heart performed veritable trampoline acts in apprehension of the Question—that is, of whether I had practiced. I never knew when he would ask it. Sometimes, on those warm California summer mornings, he greeted me with it—violin tucked under his arm—as I sneaked out to the swimming pool; sometimes he postponed it until after lunch and I was forced to answer with a belly full of cheeseburger and chocolate milkshake. Sometimes the perennial, "Not yet, Grandpa," was answered with a simple lecture beginning, "This is not good . . ." and ending with my banishment to the keyboard; and sometimes it was accepted matter-of-factly with the declaration, "We will practice together."

Oh, this practicing together! My grandfather could not tolerate a wrong note, and I played plenty of them! But more than that, he wanted, through me, to realize a musical conception, and this was almost impossible. I was just talented enough to play things rather nicely, and too lazy to want more. And this really annoyed him. How much it annoyed him at any given point in our practice time together could have been measured by the insistence of his screams and the flow of my tears. Those practice sessions were the trials-by-fire of my childhood. At some magic moment he would decide that we could stop, that we had done enough. He would take me into his arms; I would weep and he would make me promise not to tell my mother that he "became cross." Later, I found out that he confessed his loss of temper to my mother many times, and divulged the rest of our "secrets" also: all our afternoon trips for apple pie and banana fritters (forbidden to him as a diabetic). He feared he was teaching me dishonesty.

Looking back upon my childhood I search in vain for moments of true musical inspiration. All those summer evenings of Brahms, Beethoven, Mozart, and Schubert, and my memory calls up little more than the hands of the lady sitting next to me, or of the pianist for whom I turned pages, or of my grandfather at the violin. Even my own little "performances" before friends and family as Mischa Elman's carefully coached, miniature accompanist, while clear in my mind's eye, have no place in its ear. If I can conjure my grandfather's smell, the feel of sweat on his neck, his voice, the exact location of the hair on his fingers, how he dissected an Alaskan king crab, why can I not recall his Schubert? The single aural memory I have of his playing is of the slow, methodical bowing of scales. I was a preoccupied, dreamy child, not easily engaged for more than a few moments in any activity which might bring me out of myself and into the world. So the canvas of my childhood memories is pointillistic.

At the age of five, I took part in my first student recital at the San Francisco Conservatory. I can remember being very nervous and excited at the dress rehearsal, and I played several wrong notes. I remember afterward being dragged to the car by the collar, my mother insisting, "You cannot play like that! Remember who you are!"

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I must have pulled through for the performance. There was a family luncheon afterward, and I felt relieved—almost ecstatic with relief. How often I regretted playing so well at that damned recital, and the ones that followed it! It meant I had to live down a reputation of being blessed, a reputation which I felt had little to do with me. I regarded whatever there was to like in my performances as the product of fear and last-minute fudging, more than anything else. The fact is, I stopped listening when I started playing, and I had to stop playing in order to learn to listen again.

My grandfather's death, when I was twelve years old—just his age at the time of the Berlin debut—made irrelevant whatever musical development had been managed for me until that time. Soon after, I began to take books to the piano. No longer able to ignore my indifference to the instrument and to my rather elusive talent, my parents decided to let the matter rest.

In the next few years, as a stranger to the piano, I discovered many things: Judaism, music, and the patience of my long-time piano teacher, Carlo Bussotti. When I called him, at the age of fifteen, to beg to return to the fold, he did not tell me that music had missed me, nor did he embarrass me by inquiring if my intentions might finally be honorable. He assigned a Bach invention and a Liszt consolation ("for those who cannot manage any other Liszt"), and took his seat at the side of our living room piano on the appointed day at the appointed time just as matter-of-factly as he had years before. A few months later, as I was about to grope at the *Pathétique* Sonata of Beethoven, he shocked me with a request to "make music, for once." I do not believe I did, but I thought about it for the first time, and that was a beginning.

The last time I saw my grandfather was in the winter of 1966-67, a few months before he died. We went to tea, just the two of us, at a restaurant across the street from the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco. We fought. We fought in a way quite inappropriate to our relationship, and especially to the relationship of a grandfather to his granddaughter. It was over the matter of a family crisis. I can remember trying hard not to look at him. I squished the melted butter into my English muffin with my index finger, and licked the tears as they fell. We walked back to the hotel in awkward silence, as if we were quarreling lovers at an impasse.

I was angry at him for years afterward, so angry that a part of me was willing to believe the absurd things that some said about him—for example, that he had outlived his greatness.

I know it hurt my grandfather terribly that I did not practice. He even went to the trouble of mentioning it once to a journalist—probably in the hope that I would get the hint. But all that was the familiar, the agreed-upon battlefield of our relationship, and the rules of that battle were fair. Had he lived, we would have resolved our differences. All artistic matters are resolved in art; that is one of art's unique gifts.

As for the disappointments in other realms that my grandfather and I caused each other, they are too banal to merit elucidation. No love is perfect, because nobody is perfect.

I often wonder about my Nadia's musical future. She likes to listen to me play, as the young Mischa listened to his own father. Unlike him at such a tender age, she has been exposed, with the help of recordings, to a range of music from Monteverdi to Terry Riley. If the first melody my grandfather played at the age of four was a perfect rendition of the waltz "Daisy," Nadia's first performance will as likely as not be an imperfect rendition of the first piece from Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*.

Whatever her talent, my husband and I hope that she applies herself someday to serious music study, and we are unlikely to be able to keep ourselves from telling her so. She is unlikely to suffer too much from it.

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The poetry of Robert Bly

by Robert Richman

With the publication this year of Robert Bly's *Selected Poems*[1]—a volume preceded by a number of books celebrating this writer's work[2]—the time has surely come to take a closer critical look at one of the most "radical" poetic careers of our time. Robert Bly himself has always insisted that, of the many poetic movements spawned during the Sixties, none was more radical than his. To establish the priority of his own literary outlook, Bly has spent much time belittling that of his rivals in this period—the confessional and New York School poets, on the one hand, and, on the other, the formalist poets who survived the Sixties. In Bly's view, "both cooked and raw poetry in a certain sense in the United States is head poetry." To deal with the objects of the external world, as both the confessionals and the New York School poets do, is, in his view, to be in thrall to the "logic" of that world. True free-associational surrealism, which is what Bly has long advocated for poetry, is achieved by turning inward, "into" the body and away from the "head" and the world. It is therefore hardly surprising that the only criterion of quality for this poetry of "weird" and "deep images" is said to be its resistance to analysis. Bly's best poetry, according to William Heyen in *Robert Bly: When Sleepers Awake,* has always "defied serious inquiry and involved [that is, complex] explication." "The prized conditions," according to Donald Wesling, another admirer of his work, "are Not Understanding and Not Saying."

A look at the recent publications devoted to Bly's writing suggests, however, that far from defying serious inquiry and explication, Bly's poetry is as full of explicable matter as *The Waste Land.* And the question of form in Bly's poetry has also been recently opened for review. Bly himself has lately abandoned the harsh antiformal polemics that used to be his stock-in-trade. In the new *Selected Poems* he has chosen to include a few previously unpublished poems from the late Forties and early Fifties written in iambic pentameter. In addition, Bly's comments, interspersed throughout the book, show the poet far more willing to make concessions to the value of form in general and to acknowledge its presence in poems we had been previously asked to perceive very differently. This is not to say Bly has abandoned every vestige of his radical outlook. Indeed, one of the more amusing things about the *Selected Poems*—as well as many of Bly's prose writings of the Eighties—is the rhetorical hole he digs himself into by trying

1 *Selected Poems,* by Robert Bly; Harper & Row, 213 pages, $18.95.

2 *Of Solitude and Silence: Writings on Robert Bly,* edited by Richard Jones and Kate Daniels, Beacon Press, 1981; *Robert Bly: When Sleepers Awake,* edited by Joyce Peseroff, University of Michigan Press, 1984; *Talking All Morning,* a volume of interviews and papers, the University of Michigan Press, 1980; and *Robert Bly: An Introduction to the Poetry,* by Howard Nelson, Columbia University Press, 1984.

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to maintain his old radical principles while flaunting an admiration for form: "It is not iambic," he says about one group of poems in the *Selected Poems,* "but free verse with distinct memories of form." For a writer whose unequivocal rantings against form and meaning were long a familiar feature of the literary scene—most of them on the order of, "I refuse to say anything at all about prosody. What an ugly word it is!" and "It's so horrible in high school when they say, 'What's the interpretation of this poem?'"—even this small shift in outlook acquires a certain significance. Clearly a concerted effort is being made by Bly and his many supporters to present a more tempered picture of his aesthetic position for posterity. But does this revisionist view of Bly's poetry really account for what he has written and what he has claimed for it?

Robert Bly was born sixty years ago in the rural farming community of Madison, Minnesota. He belongs to the impressive generation of American poets that emerged in the years immediately following the war. Bly's fellow students at Harvard—he was there from 1947 to 1950—included Richard Wilbur, Donald Hall, Adrienne Rich, Kenneth Koch, and John Ashbery. Like many of his classmates, Bly was under the sway of the formalist impulse then governing American poetry. According to the chronology in Howard Nelson's *Robert Bly: An Introduction to the Poetry,* Bly had "virtually memorized" Robert Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle,* which had been published the year before Bly entered Harvard. But unlike most of his contemporaries, he chose to withhold from publication the book of formalist poems, entitled *The Lute of Three Loudnesses,* which he had assembled after graduation. The work from this book that is now included in the *Selected Poems* reveals an immature but by no means inconsiderable talent:

> Spring has come; I look up and see
> The agile companies of April sit
> As quaint and graceful as medieval guilds.
> Grouse feathers float away on the still lake.
> Summer and reeds; summer and partridge chicks.
> Then bees: eaters of honey till their death.
> The honey gatherers, coming and going, drive
> Their endless honey circles to the hive.
>
> The sedge root in the river lifts and frees,
> And blackbirds join in flocks, their duties through.
> And now the last autumnal freedom comes,
> And Zumbrota acorns drop, sun-pushed as plums,
> To half-wild hogs in Carolina trees,
> And disappointed bees, with half-gold feet,
> Sail home. For me this season is most sweet,
> And winter will be stamping of the feet.

Bly's dissatisfaction with the poems of *The Lute of Three Loudnesses*—"I heard a whisper of Milton," writes Bly in the *Selected Poems,* and "something in it didn't fit me"—led to a period of self-imposed isolation in New York City and Cambridge from 1951 to 1954. These years of reading and reflection have taken on a considerable importance in the Bly mythology, almost as important as the suppressed first book of poems. According to Bly and his commentators, this period was crucial in the transformation of the writer from a craftsman in rhyme and meter (what Bly would later call "antique work") to a surrealist free-verse poet. For this period of loneliness, as Bly describes it in the *Selected Poems,* "made clear to me [the] . . . interior starvation" which had given birth to the formal poetry Bly had been so unhappy with.

In 1954 Bly enrolled in the writing program at the University of Iowa, and the following year he married Carolyn McLean. In 1956, Bly travelled to Norway on a Fulbright grant to translate Norwegian poetry. Bly is of Norwegian descent but knew no Norwegian at the time. It was in the Oslo Public Library that he encountered the work of the South American poets Pablo Neruda and Cesar Vallejo, the Spanish poet Juan Jiménez, and the German poet Georg Trakl. Overwhelmed by what he perceived to be the imaginative freshness of the work of

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these "surrealist" poets—far more authentic, Bly believed, than the French surrealists—Bly promptly started a literary magazine when he returned to the United States. Its express purpose was to provide a forum for translations of the work of these writers. But *The Fifties,* as the magazine was called (it would eventually become *The Sixties, The Seventies,* and *The Eighties*), was also used as a vehicle for attacks on the poetry establishment. The editorial in the inaugural issue, published in 1958, read, in part: "The editors of this magazine think that most of the poetry published in America is too old-fashioned." Bly sent copies to all the contributors to *The New Poets of England and America,* the anthology of formalist poetry edited by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson which had appeared that same year. By the time the second installment of *The Fifties* appeared in 1959—featuring the first surrealist-inspired work of James Wright, a young poet who, like Bly, had abandoned the formalist path—Bly's commitment to his new aesthetic was solidly established.

In 1958 and 1959 Bly interrupted work on the surrealist "country poems" that would appear in his first published book, *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (1962), in order to finish a book of political poems. It was called *Poems for the Ascension of J. P. Morgan,* and failed to find a publisher. (A few of these poems would turn up in *Silence in the Snowy Fields* and *The Light Around the Body,* Bly's second published book, which appeared in 1967). Bly remained undeterred in his sense of poetic mission. American poetry was then going through a tremendous upheaval: Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* had appeared in 1956 and Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959—and Bly was anxious to be a part of the new movement. In 1961 he brought out *Twenty Poems of Georg Trakl,* translated by himself and James Wright. By this time Bly had forged more alliances with poets, among them Donald Hall and Louis Simpson, two of the editors of *The New Poetry of England and America* who were experiencing crises of confidence in their own formalist verse. Bly also met Galway Kinnell and David Ignatow around this time, two more poets sympathetic to his cause.

Silence in the Snowy Fields was the first major contribution to Bly's burgeoning surrealist movement. The first poem in the volume, entitled "Three Kinds of Pleasures," provided the movement with a kind of brief poetic agenda:

I

Sometimes, riding in a car, in Wisconsin
Or Illinois, you notice those dark telephone poles
One by one lift themselves out of the fence line
And slowly leap on the gray sky—
And past them the snowy fields.

II

The darkness drifts down like snow on the picked cornfields
In Wisconsin, and on these black trees
Scattered, one by one,
Through the winter fields—
We see stiff weeds and brownish stubble,
And white snow left now only in the wheeltracks of the combine.

III

It is a pleasure, also, to be driving
Toward Chicago, near dark,
And see the lights in the barns.
The bare trees more dignified than ever,
Like a fierce man on his deathbed,
And the ditches along the road half full of a private snow.

Bly's pleasures are indeed threefold: the surreal, as tentatively evidenced in the image of the leaping telephone poles in the first stanza; the freedom to assert one's emotional state rather than conjure it through an elaborate network of poetic devices, as in "It is a pleasure, also, to be driving . . ."; and the freedom to construct a poem out of a series of plain, if finely drawn, random observations. Most of the other poems in the book are made up of sequences of description—also occasionally interspersed with "surreal" images—that are far more

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random than this. As Bly remarked, "when the poems of *Silence in the Snowy Fields* came, I set them down with very little rewriting, maybe one or two lines only . . . they arrived as complete as they came." They were, he said on another occasion, finished "in the thirty or forty seconds that it took to write the poem." The final stanza of "Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River" seems to confirm Bly's remarks:

> Nearly to Milan, suddenly a small bridge,
> And water kneeling in the moonlight.
> In small towns the houses are built right on the ground;
> The lamplight falls on all fours on the grass.
> When I reach the river, the full moon covers it.
> A few people are talking, low, in a boat.

By attempting to "penetrate down into an evolutionary part of the mind," as Bly felt Neruda, Trakl, and Vallejo had done, the poet challenged the orthodoxies not only of the formalist poetry of the late Forties and early Fifties but of the modernist poets as well. In the poetry of Eliot, for example, seemingly disparate images and allusions are united by an underlying intellectual structure. Bly's bursts of private subjectivity, on the other hand, seek to do without such structural links. If the imagery happens to cohere, as Bly insisted, the poem had to be disposed of. According to the poet, the most "genuine line" in a poem is the "weirdest line . . . the one that apparently doesn't make any sense . . . ." "To Pound an image meant 'petals on a wet, black bough,'" said Bly. "To us an image is 'death on the deep roads of the guitar.'"

Silence in the Snowy Fields also repudiated Eliot's notion of the objective correlative. In Bly's view, the emotion that the correlative objectifies is destroyed by the very process of its objectification. Bly's "deep" poetic images, emerging from "within," purportedly contained purer emotions whose psychic energy was still intact: "If I reached my hands down, near the earth,/I could take handfuls of darkness!" or "The sun lies happily on my knees." Bly's other way of challenging the objective correlative (for which he is perhaps more famous) is to make simple statements of his feelings. Two well-known examples of this in *Silence in the Snowy Fields* are "I have awakened at Missoula, Montana, utterly happy" (the last line of "In a Train") and "Oh, on an early morning I think I shall live forever!" (the first line of "Poem in Three Parts").

It is easy to understand why Bly's aesthetic—or anti-aesthetic—became so popular in the Sixties and Seventies. It found sympathetic readers among the growing number of people who resented the complexity of modernist—and postwar—poetry. Eliot made no bones about the fact that the poet must be learned and his work difficult. It was those who felt themselves to be disenfranchised from Eliot's exclusive club that Bly claimed as his own. Being a poet could not be simpler, he told them, because each one of us

> has our own psychic rhythms . . . . Anybody at his peak moment, who wants to sit down and write a poem, can write it . . . .

All one needed was a little "inner animal imagery," or, failing that, the ability to state that one was happy, sad, or indifferent in a given town at a given time of day. The idea spread like wildfire.

It is not surprising that many perceived Bly's poetry to be a long-awaited resurgence of Romanticism. But the nineteenth-century English Romantic poets' suffusion of their being into the external world is vastly different from Bly's solipsistic engorging of the world. As Robert Langbaum points out in *The Poetry of Experience* (1957), the Romantic poets did not so much seek to overwhelm the world with their subjective being as confirm their inner experiences in the crucible of the world. "There remains," Langbaum tells us, "the hardheaded critical awareness [on the part of the poets] that the self is something other than the object" of the poet's attention. The Romantics never sought, as Langbaum says, "to put the head to sleep." Putting the head to sleep is a per-

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fectly apt description of the poetic program of Robert Bly.

Silence in the Snowy Fields was not entirely devoid of poetic virtue, however. There is something to be said for the freshness of Bly's language, and for the poet's attempt to bring a wide-eyed wonder to the Minnesota countryside. But the solipsism of this poetry—perfectly embodied in Bly's barren, unpopulated landscapes—all but obscures the musicality of the language.

As appealing as the solipsistic poetry of *Silence in the Snowy Fields* was, it lacked the single element crucial in the Sixties for a truly popular—and critical—success: politics. This element was firmly entrenched in Bly's next book, *The Light Around the Body,* which was published in 1967 and received the National Book Award for poetry in 1968. The conflation of surrealism and politics—a practice Bly also borrowed from his South American models—is evident in "War and Silence"—

> The bombers spread out, temperature steady.
> A Negro's ear sleeping in an automobile tire.
> Pieces of timber float by, saying nothing.
> . . .
> Bishops rush about crying, "There is no war,"
> And bombs fall,
> Leaving a dust on the beech trees.
> . . .
> One leg walks down the road and leaves
> The other behind; the eyes part
> And fly off in opposite directions.
> . . .
> Filaments of death grow out.
> The sheriff cuts off his black legs
> And nails them to a tree.

—as well as in "Driving Through Minnesota During the Hanoi Bombings":

> The sergeant said,
> "I felt sorry for him
> And blew his head off with a shotgun."
> These instants become crystals,
> Particles
> The grass cannot dissolve. Our own gaiety
> Will end up
> In Asia, and you will look down in your cup
> And see
> Black Starfighters.
> Our own cities were the ones we wanted
> to bomb!

In "The Teeth Mother Naked at Last"—first published by City Lights Books in 1970 and included three years later in *Sleepers Joining Hands*—surrealistic imagery is for the most part disposed of. Replacing it is a sustained, hate-filled invective against everything in American life that Bly loathed:

> Helicopters flutter overhead. The death-
> bee is coming. Super Sabres
> like knots of neurotic energy sweep
> around and return.
> This is Hamilton's triumph.
> This is the triumph of a centralized bank.
> . . .
> The ministers lie, the professors lie, the
> television reporters lie, the priests lie.
> What are these lies? It means that the country
> wants to die.
> . . .
> This is what it's like for a rich country to
> make war.
> This is what it's like to bomb huts (afterwards
> described as "structures").
> This is what it's like to kill marginal farmers
> (afterwards described as "Communists").
> . . .
> It's because the average hospital bed now costs
> two hundred dollars a day
> that we bomb the hospitals in the north . . . .

Any poet not mentioning the war in 1970 ran the risk, of course, of being implicated in the "genocide." All the same, this appeared to be an egregious about-face for Bly. Unlike the confessional poets, for whom politics was a logical next step, Bly had presented himself as the poet of interior life. He had claimed, again and again, that society and culture threatened the purity of the poet's psychic rhythms. He had vociferously campaigned against what he called the "journalistic mind" in poetry, and had

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criticized poetry in which the words, as he said, had "their energy corrupted" by evil external forces. If *Silence in the Snowy Fields* demanded a poetry truly free of the rhetoric of the world, then *The Light Around the Body* seemed to be an outright betrayal of the earlier book. It was a book swamped by the rhetoric of the world.

Bly had an explanation, of course. The political poems of *The Light Around the Body,* he reasoned, were attempts to show "that the political poem comes out of the deepest privacy." "Neruda, Vallejo, Antonio Machado, Aleixandre, and Lorca," says Bly in the preface to the section of poems from *The Light Around the Body* in the *Selected Poems,* taught him that it was "just and natural to write of important national griefs in one's poetry as well as of private griefs." As long as these "national griefs" emerged from one's body, insisted Bly, they were not simply political rhetoric but the authentic subjective eruptions of a deeply grieved person. And who was to say whether these poems emerged from one's inner soul or were the product of the fallen world? Why, the poet himself! What we were offered was, in short, the same old solipsism. And as before, anyone who dared to question whether political imagery could be of the requisite psychic depth was automatically accused of using the superannuated critical tools of a dying culture. In the Sixties and Seventies, few wanted to be guilty of this crime.

Even if we take *The Light Around the Body* and "Teeth Mother" in their own terms—as attempts to expiate the alleged sins (greed, commercialism, aggression) of America—they still miss their target. Bly's high moral fervor is undone by some gross miscalculations. Most obvious of these is Bly's repeated stereotyping of people. "No one in business can be a Christian," says Bly in one poem. Accountants, executives, advertising men, and Indians are all similarly typecast (the last in a poem entitled "Hatred of Men with Black Hair"). This alarming attitude crops up in Bly's other works and statements from this time as well. In an interview from 1966 Bly declared that "the typical football player . . . mistreats women, because he has always mistreated the woman that is inside him." What this stereotyping now looks like is the inevitable point of view of someone who has dwelled too long in the unpopulated landscapes of his own subjectivity.

Bly's political poetry corresponded to some rel-life activism during these years. In 1966 he organized the first anti-war poetry readings at Reed College and the University of Washington. The same year he co-founded American Writers Against the Vietnam War. In 1967 he took part in a Pentagon demonstration, and was arrested for blocking the entrance to an induction center. And in 1968, at the ceremony for the National Book Awards, Bly in his acceptance speech urged the young people in the audience to defy the draft. At the same ceremony he donated his award money to the "resistance." Ten years later Bly was still castigating his fellow poets—John Berryman was his bête noire—for "refusing to get up on one of those [anti-war] stages." Much of the other work Bly produced during the late Sixties and early Seventies—*Twenty Poems of Pablo Neruda* (1969), translated by Bly and Wright, *The Morning Glory* (1969), a chapbook of prose poems, *Twenty Poems of Tomas Tranströmer* (1970), and *Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems* (1971)—was obscured by the running political commentary. In 1971 Bly predicted "a very swift disintegration of all the structures of society" replaced by a world of isolated, self-sufficient communes. Clearly, Bly's primary interest was in taking his solipsism to the streets.

"The Teeth Mother Naked at Last" was the first poem written following Bly's intensive reading of Jung, which had begun in 1969. Jung's association of the unconscious with femininity and the conscious mind with masculinity struck a responsive chord in Bly, who promptly caricatured it in his writings. As Bly explains it in the essay "I Came Out of the Mother Naked" in *Sleepers Joining Hands* (1973), masculine awareness—which Bly identified with rules and morality—defeated the feminine consciousness—iden-

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tified with nature, compassion, intuition, and poetry—in a struggle for control of the planet. *Sleepers Joining Hands* was an attempt, in Bly's words, to "right [the] spiritual balance" on earth. But for Bly righting the balance naturally meant giving the mother consciousness the upper hand. Bly condemns everything associated (in his own mind, anyway) with the masculine impulse, from literary criticism to the desire to "go out and conquer Africa," and is full of praise for everything associated with the feminine outlook. What Bly really liked about Jung's theories, or what he saw in them, anyway, was their simplicity. The world was neatly divided into two camps: the good and the bad. One is to be disposed of and one is to be saved. All special circumstances, contingencies, and complexities are conveniently ignored.

Of course, the masculine attribute most roundly condemned by Bly during his Jungian phase was poetic form. In an interview published in *Craft* magazine in 1972, Bly went to considerable lengths to indicate that his poetry is written without the assistance of what he refers to as "the stiff part of the mind." After the interviewer gets Bly to admit grudgingly that the poems of *The Light Around the Body* are composed in "high" or poetic language, the interviewer—clearly relishing the idea that he'll go on record as the only person ever to have forced Robert Bly to admit that his poetry is crafted—proudly declares: "That's a matter of craft." But Bly retorts: ". . . what guides this craft is an instinctive sense for when a sentence is alive and when it's not . . . ." When it comes to his "technique" or to what gives birth to a poem, Bly is even more evasive. He simply does not say anything.

Not surprisingly, Bly tried to revise literary history along these same anti-formal lines. All "great poems," he said, "like the *Odyssey,* take[s] [their] form . . . without mind intervention." Bly sought to revolutionize the art of translating poetry in a similar fashion. Knowing the language well wasn't the most important factor in translating poetry, Bly insisted, since "[w]hat you are essentially doing is slipping for a moment into the mood of the other poet . . . into an emotion which you may possibly have experienced at some time." In truth, Bly's ideas about translation merely allowed the translator, as James Dickey put it, to take "as many liberties as [he] wants to take with the original, it being understood that this enables [him] somehow to approach the 'spirit' of the poem [he] is translating." The emergence of public readings of poetry during this time was also given encouragement in Bly's ideas. When you read poetry, Bly explained, the mind intervenes. When you hear poetry, on the other hand, there is less chance of the mind analyzing the work and thereby suppressing a deep subjective interaction with the poem. Criticism of poetry also underwent a drastic change, thanks in part to Bly's theories. Fewer and fewer writers on poetry analyzed what they read. Instead poetry was admired for—to borrow a phrase of Howard Nelson's—its "flowing, rushing, knotting, whirling" energy. An entire way of writing about poetry was quickly becoming obsolete, and it was Bly who had played a major role in drafting the blueprint of its destruction.

Bly provided the generation of poets coming of age in the Seventies with plenty of examples of anti-poetic poetry to accompany his anti-critical rhetoric. The following excerpt, for example, from Bly's "Six Winter Privacy Poems"—which opens the book *Sleepers Joining Hands*—reminded budding poets how easy it was to stand by whatever banality they had first put down on paper:

> My shack has two rooms; I use one.
> The lamplight falls on my chair and table
> and I fly into one of my poems—
> I can't tell you where—
> as if I appeared where I am now,
> in a wet field, snow falling . . . .
>
> . . .
>
> There is solitude like black mud!
> Sitting in this darkness singing,
> I can't tell if this joy
> is from the body, or the soul, or a third
> place!

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Bly wasn't through yet. After all, he was still using the stanza and line—"antiquated" poetic units of measure. The prose poems of *The Morning Glory* (1975) and *This Body is Made of Camphor and Gopherwood* (1977) sought, in Bly's words, to "calm the language down" even more, thereby making it a truer reflection of the timeless flow of the inner body. "[I]t was as if I had descended into my body at last," says Bly in the *Selected Poems,* "and that immersion is the subject of the poems. The joy [of the poetry] lies in its being unfocused":

> The cucumbers are thirsty, their big leaves turn away from the wind. I water them after supper; the hose curled near the rhubarb. The wind sound blows through the head . . . . What is comforted words help, the sunken islands speak to us . . . .
>
> Is this world animal or vegetable? Others love us, the cabbages love the earth, the earth is fond of the heavens—A new age comes close through the dark, threatens much, so much is passing away . . . .

Even some of the critics who had previously supported Bly rebelled against *This Body is Made of Camphor and Gopherwood.* One of them, Philip Dacey, in a piece entitled "This Book is Made of Turkey Soup and Star Music," cited by Nelson, wrote:

> Although Bly, a classic literary demagogue, rails against artifice in poetry . . . many of the prose poems in this book are more artificial—pieces clearly contrived in a language one is not likely to hear outside the poem—than virtually any of, say, Frost's poems in blank verse. Frost and countless others achieve the natural or a semblance of it through the artificial; Bly wishes to bypass the latter and ends up smack in the middle of it.

Apparently Bly was sensitive to the charges. His next book, *This Tree Will Be Here for a Thousand Years* (1979)—a group of surrealist country poems much in the vein of those in *Silence in the Snowy Fields*—was an obvious effort to conciliate the critics and readers who had grown impatient with his work. But these poems, written at intervals during the previous sixteen years, are more literary and less spontaneous than their predecessors. The book was promptly attacked by Eliot Weinberger—never a supporter of Bly's—who began his review, which appeared in *The Nation* on November 17, 1979, with the sentence, "Robert Bly is a windbag, a sentimentalist, a slob in the language."

Bly attempted to start off the decade of the Eighties on a new foot. *The Man in the Black Coat Turns* (1981) was heralded as the poet's long overdue reconciliation with the masculine consciousness, a "return to the father," as Bly put it. "To be able to respect your father is such a beautiful thing!" Bly declared in an interview at the time. Although the surface details of the poems in this book seem to be vaguely "about" masculinity, little else has changed. Indeed, the same undiluted anti-rationalism and anti-formalism that governed the earlier poetry governs almost everything here. This is from "What the Fox Agreed to Do":

> And the shells, the mollusc shells, grow large.
> Smoke twists up through water,
> the moon rockets up from the sea floor.
>
> The fox agrees to leap into the ocean.
> The human being feels a splash around him.
> Hebrews straddle the slippery dolphins.

And this is from the prose poem entitled "Eleven O'Clock at Night" (none of these prose poems were included in the *Selected Poems*):

> I lie alone in my bed; cooking and stories are over at last, and some peace comes. And what did I do today? I wrote down some thoughts on sacrifice that other people had, but couldn't relate them to my own life. I brought my daughter to the bus—on the way to Minneapolis for a haircut—and I waited twenty minutes with her in the somnolent hotel lobby. I wanted the mail to bring some praise for my

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> ego to eat, and was disappointed. I added up my bank balance, and found only $65, when I need over a thousand to pay the bills for this month alone. So this is how my life is passing before the grave?

The critics in Bly's thrall—there were still many of them—responded to this book, as they almost always had, by relinquishing their critical powers: "I risk, of course," said one, "by trying to be too rational (male-conscious), damaging [Bly's] subtle fabrics."

Howard Nelson, in his recent book on Bly, does not view the poetry in *The Man in the Black Coat Turns* as another episode of solipsistic surrealism. He finds it not only full of meaning—an attempt, in his words, to "recover the past"—but full of allusions to the New Testament as well. But then Nelson discovers allusions, "sexual metaphors," "symbols," and coherent imagery everywhere in the Bly *oeuvre*. "The consciousness in the *Snowy Fields,*" Nelson avers, "is in fact quite complicated." Nelson's ability to misconstrue Bly's poetry—not to mention his ignoring the poet's numerous statements of intention—is remarkable. Bly's defiantly illogical imagery is said by Nelson to be a "smooth arc of association"—a phrase more easily applied to the poetry of the despised Eliot than to that of Bly. Astonishingly, Nelson asserts that Bly

> prizes spontaneity but also believes in revision. For him, the free flow of the mind in and of itself is neither avant-garde nor necessarily very interesting.

This is not the blatant contradiction of Bly's aesthetic it appears to be, or so Nelson claims. For the "intelligence" Nelson finds running rampant in Bly's poetry is not the mind's intelligence, but the "body's wisdom," the consciousness of nature. "The rational intelligence," explains Nelson, "is not the only intelligence."

John Unterecker, who has contributed a foreword to Nelson's book, resorts to a similar strategy in his discussion of Bly's musical effects. Bly's "high" poetic language, Unterecker says, is "probably largely uncalculated," "perhaps casual in composition," "half-conscious," and written "without a great deal of premeditation." Yet a few sentences later Unterecker acknowledges that Bly "trusts to an ear that he's trained by careful listening . . . ." Now *trained* is very much the opposite of *casual, half-conscious* and *uncalculated.* But Unterecker, like Nelson, wishes to honor Bly's free-associational method while simultaneously claiming some quality of mind for the poetry. Clearly, it is no easy task.

In truth, though, Unterecker and Nelson are only responding to a tack recently taken by Bly himself. In a 1981 essay called "Form that is Neither In nor Out"—which begins, "I have been thinking lately that we have not been very faithful servants of art"—Bly declares:

> . . . I have often thought of form as a prison . . . a kind of dungeon in which heart material gets imprisoned. Suppose I were wrong on that. If so, we need to find a way to speak of form so that its wild or intense quality becomes clear. The distinction between form as prison and form as wildness may correspond to a distinction between kinds of form, in particular, the mechanical and the organic . . . . I maintain then that the more form a poem has —I mean living form—the closer it comes to the wild animal.

This view is reiterated in an essay in the *Selected Poems* entitled "The Prose Poem as an Evolving Form," in which Bly speaks of how "form in art relies on form in nature for its model." But whether it is Nelson's "organic" form, Unterecker's "half-conscious" form, or Bly's "wild" and "living" form, it all bespeaks a willed effort to conflate two irreconcilable attitudes toward poetry. For Bly and his critics, it is not enough for poetry to appeal to a primitive level of consciousness. It must be "composed" by that consciousness too.

Intelligence and form have been praised by Bly in other recent essays and interviews too. "All artists love art," he says in one,

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"but we miss sometimes in Whitman reminders of what a triumph the intensely worked poem can be." "Before solitude can give any nourishment to the poet, evidently a certain level of literary culture has to be reached." "Writing poetry means a lot of study." "Obsession with image can become a psychic habit as much as obsession with persona."[3]

Robert Bly's recent change of heart is interesting as a part of the cultural history of our time—and anyway, he has every right to change his mind. But his well-publicized shift does nothing to rescue the poems, the majority of which suffer from the two worst poetic excesses of the Sixties: politics and solipsism. This is unfortunate, because Bly has displayed from the start an enormous gift for language, and these excesses have worked against his strongest talent. To this reader, only a handful of the pastoral poems in *Silence in the Snowy Fields,* an equally small number of the "thought" poems from the early Eighties, and the previously suppressed formalist work of the late Forties do not betray this gift. Here is a section of another early poem—entitled "Schoolcraft's Diary Written on The Missouri: 1830"—which we are now seeing for the first time:

> Now night grows old above this riverboat.
> Before I end, I shall include account
> Of incident tonight that moved my wonder.
> At dusk we tied the ship to trees on shore;
> No mortal boat in these night shoals can live.
> At first I heard a cry: then shufflings, steps.
> The muffled sounds on deckoak overhead
> Drew me on deck. The air was chill, and there
> I sensed, because these senses here are sharp
> And must be, something living and unknown.

Far from being evidence of "interior starvation," as Bly claimed they were, these youthful lines hint at what Bly's poetic achievement might have been had he not chosen to abandon formalism for the gratifications of a half-baked surrealism. What we have instead is poetry disfigured by politics and the supposed pleasures he derives from being "wrapped in my joyful flesh."

3 As John Haines writes in an essay in *Of Solitude and Silence,* by the late Sixties and Seventies "a second and third hand pastoral surreality manifested itself and all kinds of people began writing poems crowded with stone and earth images and forced imagery of darkness. Small, tousled animals were creeping out of all kinds of castles in the oaks and maples, and from little houses in the grass. Moose were sighted in the suburbs of Los Angeles, as I recall, and wolves were baited on the rooftops in San Francisco."

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Poems *by Sidney Wade, Elizabeth Spires & Louis Simpson*

Gas

after Edward Hopper

A lonely man
performs some necessary ritual
behind the pump. We cannot tell
exactly what it is he does because
the angle is so odd. A rack of cans

of oil between
two pumps on the island stands, as they al-
ways do, conveniently avail-
able, in easy reach of any needy
motorist. The light is low, and the trees,

massed heavily
behind the man and his pumps, march darkly
off to the right. A modest shock
of roadside weeds attends the greenery
as it condenses. On the periphery,

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out of our ken,
shines a source of artificial light. We
are meant to feel the clutch of the
evening. It is not benevolent.
The artist has invested his talent

in loneliness.
The values and the crusty inflections
of his particular diction
demonstrate devotion to the modest
fears of the soul in the longest moments

of late after-
noon. A sign hangs white above the station.
Mobilgas and Pegasus. A
flag of sorts, a standard, here, to more
than gas. The language, though hard, is clear.

—*Sidney Wade*

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A face

Touching your face, I almost touch my own,
skin stretched tightly as a surgeon's glove
worn in the pulse and flush of the operation.
Once, laughing and talking with you,
at an outdoor cafe where people sat at tables,
two by two, I saw pain's pentimento
suddenly bleed through your face and rise
like a bruise to cloud clear eyes—
just as the sun slipped into a hole in the sky—
the face behind the face no face I knew.

Too soon time's features will reveal
a bare hill of cheekbone, windwarped sockets
of stone my eye must climb to see the *I* I am,
a mouthhole shaped around a breathless song
I cannot bear to sing, to sing
for very long: *Where have the stars gone?*
Why am I here? How long before the others come?

—*Elizabeth Spires*

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Another boring story

Chekhov has "A Boring Story"
about a professor.
The old man's wife and children
don't understand him and don't care.

His wife's only concern is
to marry off their daughter
to this blockhead, a nonentity.
So the old man goes on a journey
to investigate, find out what he can
about their future son-in-law . . .
and finds himself in a hotel room
in a strange town, wondering
how on earth life brought him there.

He has a friend, a young woman.
They're not lovers . . . loving friends.
She had an affair that turned sour
and now she's at loose ends.
She asks him what to do, what to live for,
and he has nothing to say to her,
not a word. That's the end of the story.

Here's another boring story about a professor.
Years ago he embarked on an affair
with a young woman. It became a scandal.
His wife threw him out,
then she took him back. The young woman
tried to kill herself, I'm told.

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I see them fairly often.
He and I talk about literature
and what's wrong with the country
while his wife knits or does some ironing.

I find myself looking out the window
or at the walls. Some surrealist
recommends staring at a wall
till something unusual happens . . .
an arm protruding from the wall.

He mixes drinks, she lays out cheese-dip.
Then the children come running in,
streaked with dirt from wherever they've been.
They make for the cheese-dip,
stick their fingers in and dabble.

I've seen them at the table.
They snatch the meat from the plate
with their hands.

She smiles at her little savages.
One thing's sure: she's not raising her children
to be members of any faculty.

—Louis Simpson

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Music

The Berlin Philharmonic without Karajan

by Samuel Lipman

It has seemed for some years now that the Berlin Philharmonic is the nonpareil of orchestras playing today. Whether on its innumerable recordings or in the quite limited number of concerts it has played here over the past three decades, the Berlin Philharmonic has set the kind of standard in performance that we in America used to associate with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Serge Koussevitzky, or with the Philadelphia Orchestra, under both Leopold Stokowski and, later, Eugene Ormandy.

So it was a matter of extraordinary interest when several months ago a new visit of the Berlin Philharmonic to these shores was announced. The tour wasn't scheduled to be anything like a full traversal of the continent; it was to include only a few concerts, including appearances in Boston, New York, Chicago, and cities on the Pacific Coast. Indeed, people on the inside of the music business widely expressed the opinion that the Berlin's American concerts were only throwaway events, done, as it were, *en passant* as the orchestra travelled to Japan, its "real" destination.

The excitement caused by the announcement of these concerts, few as they were, was of course not solely a matter of the Berlin's great reputation. The tour would provide audiences with one more chance, perhaps the last, to hear Herbert von Karajan, the orchestra's great conductor (and music director since 1955).[1] Not surprisingly, tickets to the concerts vanished immediately upon their being put up for sale.

As it turned out, American audiences were not to get this chance to hear Mr. Karajan. At the beginning of October, Columbia Artists Management, the organizers of the orchestra's American concerts, notified the newspapers that Mr. Karajan had been stung by an insect and had come down with the rare (and serious) Lyme disease. As a result, he would not be able to do the tour. The orchestra was to come in any case, and Mr. Karajan's place was to be shared by Seiji Ozawa and James Levine, two conductors now very active on the American concert scene. Mr. Ozawa, the music director of the Boston Symphony, and Mr. Levine, the artistic director of the Metropolitan Opera, are both favorites of Mr. Karajan's. At one time it had been rumored that Mr. Ozawa was Mr. Karajan's choice to succeed him in Berlin, and Mr. Levine is currently active each summer at the Salzburg Festival, perhaps Mr. Karajan's chief musical fiefdom.

The New York concert at the Metropolitan Opera House on Sunday afternoon, October 19, was assigned to Mr. Levine. Mr. Karajan's program—which was to have

1 For a discussion of Karajan and the recent biography of him by Roger Vaughan, see my article in *The New Criterion,* October, 1986; for a discussion of the Berlin Philharmonic's 1982 American tour under Karajan, see my article in *The New Criterion,* December, 1982.

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consisted of the Ninth Symphony of Bruckner and a short piece by Mozart—was changed to a rather more "popular" program for Mr. Levine. His program was to begin with the *Siegfried Idyll* of Wagner, which would be followed by the *Four Last Songs* of Strauss (with the Bulgarian soprano Anna Tomowa-Sintow as soloist) and the Seventh Symphony of Beethoven. What had been a sold-out concert for Mr. Karajan quickly became anything but a sold-out concert for Mr. Levine. Advertisements for the concert appeared in *The New York Times* until the very day of the concert, and it seems that many tickets were given for distribution to members of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. Indeed, several minutes before the concert began both the most expensive tickets and the cheapest were still available.

In the event, the great hall, holding almost four thousand people, was full, and the audience responded to the orchestra's entrance onstage—just before the music began—with a hearty wave of applause. A word is perhaps in order about late stage appearance: not for the Berlin Philharmonic is the wretched practice, so common among American orchestras, of appearing before the incoming audience a half hour before the concert starts and warming up at full force with excerpts from the evening's program as well as favorite selections from the solo concerto repertory. On the occasion of its New York concert, the Berlin Philharmonic was represented onstage before the concert only by the double-bass section, which made practically no sound at all, and by the tympanist, who tuned his instruments with great reserve and delicacy. The lovely result was that the first real sound heard by the audience at the concert was music, not aimless fiddling and tootling.

I must say at the outset that the decision—one must assume it was made by Mr. Levine—to combine on the first half of the program the Wagner *Siegfried Idyll* with the Strauss *Four Last Songs* seemed both interesting and fraught with difficulty. These two masterworks, in some ways so similar in their prevailingly mellow and gentle mood, are in fact at opposite ends of the emotional spectrum.

The *Siegfried Idyll* celebrates what may well have been the high point of Wagner's personal life: the birth and infancy of Siegfried, his only son. The story of the work's first performance has often been told. Siegfried had been born to Wagner and his wife Cosima in June of 1869, and in November of 1870 Wagner composed a serenade for his wife's birthday, which fell on Christmas Day. The work, scored for fifteen players, was secretly rehearsed and then, with Wagner conducting, performed for the surprised Cosima as she awakened in her bedroom at the Villa Triebschen on Lake Lucerne. Except for an old German cradle song, the material of the serenade came from the last act of *Siegfried,* the writing of which Wagner had finished (all but the last few pages) the previous year shortly after the birth of his son. And so the music of the *Siegfried Idyll,* drawn from Wagner's immersion in the opera, including the ecstasy Siegfried feels upon freeing Brünnhilde from her fire-girt rock and Brünnhilde's passionate surrender to her lover's entreaties, represents Wagner's own fervent involvement both with his wife and his infant son. After writing the *Siegfried Idyll,* Wagner went on to finish *Götterdämmerung,* oversee the first performance of the *Ring* at Bayreuth in 1876, write *Parsifal,* and oversee its first performance at Bayreuth in 1882, the year before his death in Venice at the age of almost seventy.

In contrast to the inner vitality of the *Siegfried Idyll,* the *Four Last Songs* of Strauss represent a very old man's farewell to life and to music. They were written in 1948, when the composer was eighty-four. The two works are thus very different. The *Siegfried Idyll* is dominated near its end by the melody which in *Siegfried* accompanies the hero's words to Brünnhilde:

Sie ist mir ewig,
ist mir immer,
Erb' und Eigen,
Ein und All'

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(She is ever mine,
is always mine,
my heritage and own,
one and all!)

But how different is the Strauss! *Im Abendrot* ("In the Sunset Glow"), which is set to a poem by Joseph von Eichendorff (1788-1857), closes the *Four Last Songs*. It ends with the words "Ist dies etwa der Tod?" ("Can this perhaps be death?") as the orchestra mournfully invokes the closing theme from Strauss's hugely successful early tone poem *Death and Transfiguration*. And the valedictory nature of the Strauss songs is not limited to the finale. Everywhere the mood is somber, even in the opening poem by Hermann Hesse, *Frühling* ("Spring"); Strauss's (and Hesse's) spring is filled with suspended life and nostalgic ecstasy rather than the coursing vitality of which composers and poets love to speak in their youth. And in the two middle songs, *September* and *Beim Schlafengehn* ("Upon Going to Sleep"), again set to poems by Hesse, the mood has all the sadness of a long life come to its end, a sadness mitigated only by the faith that for an artist there is an eternal existence beyond the physical world.

Hesse's words in *Beim Schlafengehn* deserve quoting, both for their own lyrical beauty and for the insight they give into Strauss's musical treatment:

Nun der Tag mich müd' gemacht,
Soll mein sehnliches Verlangen
Freundlich die gestirnte Nacht
Wie ein müdes Kind empfangen.

(Now the day has made me tired,
my passionate yearning shall
the starry night friendlily receive
like a tired child.)

These words follow a magical passage for solo violin, in which the instrument, in itself a surrogate for the soprano voice—Strauss's lifelong representation of the eternal feminine—prepares the way for the artist's hope of disembodied eternal life:

Und die Seele unbewacht
Will in freien Flügen schweben,
Um im Zauberkreis der Nacht
Tief und tausendfach zu leben.

(The Soul, unguarded,
will hover in free flight
about the enchanted circle of night
to live deeply, a thousandfold.)

If the juxtaposition of the Wagner and the Strauss in the concert had seemed problematical, no such worries could attach to the choice of the Seventh Symphony of Beethoven. This work, of powerful rhythm and with countenance at once sunny and serious, has nothing to do with the world of tired or even fecund old men. Wagner himself was right on the mark when he called the finale of the Seventh Symphony the "apotheosis of the dance." To hear the work now is to receive an antidote to the apathy and despair so characteristic of today's thinking classes.

I must confess that it seems a kind of overkill to subject the program of the Berlin concert to such analysis, for in the event it was a tired-sounding and boring affair. Great as the Berlin Philharmonic undoubtedly is as an ensemble, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the most interesting part of its performance at the Metropolitan Opera House was the period of relative silence before the music started. The silence was audacious; the concert was merely dull.

Indeed, I am tempted to apply to the program as played a variation of a classificatory scheme once used in mail-order catalogues. They ranked their merchandise as good, better, and best; in the case of the Levine concert, the appropriate terms are dull, duller, and dullest. The Beethoven Symphony was dull, with often ragged ensemble (perhaps due, it must be said, to the orchestra's insufficient rehearsal time with Mr. Levine) and a deadening preponderance of brass and tympani. The work did not end with any sense of implied progression and gathering momentum; instead, the usually exciting last movement just got faster and then suddenly

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Four Abstract Classicists

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John McLaughlin

December 2, 1986 - January 3, 1987

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stopped, the orchestra having run out of notes to play and the conductor of bars to beat.

The distinction of being duller belonged to the Strauss songs. Though Anna Tomowa-Sintow is certainly a world-class performer if judged in terms of the engagements she fills, her voice seems to me often unfocused and wobbly; her delivery, too, seems marked by the opera singer's theatricality of gesture and movement rather than by the *Lieder* singer's self-effacing involvement with mood. But the major problem of the performance did not come from her. The problem lay rather in the musical inspiration—or the lack thereof—coming from the podium. Everything seemed so spun out and so drawn out, so cautious and so reserved, that it put one in mind of a particularly somnolent traversal of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande.*

Dullest, alas, was the Wagner. Here too there were signs of inadequate rehearsal preparation. The ensemble in the opening octave leap in the violins, for example, was not precise, and neither was the answering entrance on the next beat of the violas and the cellos. Totally missing was any sense of what must have been the gaiety, the heartiness, and the good feeling of the work's birth and first performance. Everything was so hushed and breathless as to be tentative and even insubstantial. The parts in the score marked *forte* by the composer shared in the general apathy, and even the horn call at the end, so revelatory of Wagner's passionate feelings about his wife, seemed to belong to the category of "pipedreams," the kind of easy-to-listen-to organ music now becoming increasingly popular on WNYC, New York's city-owned public radio station.

It would be unfair not to make clear that even on this dismal occasion there were many wonderful things in the playing of the Berlin Philharmonic. Wonderful soft brass playing, silky strings (especially in soft passages), and a total absence of the grainy sound quality now sadly so characteristic of American orchestras—all these splendid virtues seemed to lack only a great leader

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making use of them. What an orchestra can do serves musical purposes only when the orchestra is given musical purposes to serve. In the concerts I have heard of the Berlin Philharmonic under Herbert von Karajan, there were musical purposes to serve; it has been in the services of Mr. Karajan's musical purposes that the orchestra has gained its present reputation.

But on this particular Sunday afternoon, in the neo-1890s red-and-gold plush splendor of the Metropolitan Opera House, there did not seem to be anything of musical value going on, unless one counts a fancy audience witnessing the work of a rudderless ensemble as musically valuable. Here, in the heartland repertory of German romantic music, it was only possible for this listener to appreciate these undoubted masterpieces of the repertory, and this undoubtedly great orchestra, by filling in all that was lacking on the podium with the formative artistic experiences of a lifetime of professional musical activity, concertgoing, and record listening.

For those of mature years, the necessity of engaging in this kind of divided listening is unpleasant enough. I do not know what the present shortfall in contemporary musical experiences—and it must be remembered that I am talking here not about musical composition but about the vastly less problematic area of performance—means for a new generation of audiences, a generation which comes to concerts and to serious music without the golden memories of the past. But I suspect the worst. I suspect that all the folderol over international celebrities, promoted by powerful management and publicity apparatuses, all the musicological blather about putatively original performances on putatively original instruments, all the hype about great new art and the glorious institutions which are giving it birth—the whole barrage of words only obscures a simple fact: little of interest is now going on in music, and that little is but a pale imitation of the past.

There was a curious moment in the Berlin Philharmonic concert just before the music was to resume after the intermission. From somewhere upstairs in the cavernous auditorium came a disembodied voice, yelling something which sounded very much like: "This concert does not evoke the memory of Wilhelm Furtwängler!" To disturb a concert with such a remark is surely to carry the practice of speaking one's mind too far. But however addled he may be, the heckler had a point: the only musical event going on at the Metropolitan Opera House on the afternoon of October 19, 1986, was the sketchy and inadequate evocation of a better and a richer musical time. That one is tired of restating this simple truth doesn't make the truth any less true.

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Architecture

"I am a whore": Philip Johnson at eighty

by Diana Ketcham

In his eightieth year, Philip Johnson has given the adage "architecture is an old man's game" a new dimension. For what other architect of his generation can match Johnson's recent exploits? Having started late (he did not finish his architecture degree at Harvard until he was thirty-seven), Johnson is now making up for it with a vengeance. In old age he has taken on a new role—one might say *the* new role—as masterbuilder for some of the nation's principal real-estate interests; and in the process he has created a new genre of revivalist architecture, with a series of skyscrapers in an astonishing variety of historical styles.

Most of our major American cities have felt the impact of one of Johnson's lavish office-tower designs, or soon will. The list is staggering. Chicago's Loop is about to have a gable-roofed "Rootesque" tower on La Salle Street. Boston's Back Bay has the "Baroque" New England Life, with the "Palladian" International Place at Fort Hill under way in the financial district. In San Francisco, three Johnson buildings have gone up since 1982: a harlequin-patterned Neiman Marcus store on Union Square, the cylindrical 101 California Street, and the mansard-roofed 580 California Street. Houston has the trapezoidal Pennzoil Place, the "Dutch-gabled" RepublicBank Center, Post Oak Central, and Transco Tower. Minneapolis has the faceted glass IDS Center; Pittsburgh the Gothic PPG Center; Dallas, Momentum Place and the "Second Empire" The Crescent; Atlanta the I.B.M. Atlantic Center; and Denver the United Bank Center. New York is the site of his famous Chippendale-topped AT&T building, the turreted Two Federal Reserve Plaza, and the oval-volume "Lipstick Building" at Fifty-third and Third. Johnson's four mansard-roofed towers for Times Square still await approval.

Perhaps the impact of so much building has been overlooked in the context of Johnson's many other activities. As the American architect best suited to act as a spokesman for a tongue-tied profession, Johnson the commentator and media gadfly is a very busy man. His reputation as a wit is legendary and deserved. It won him popularity as a lecturer at Yale in the Forties and Fifties, and a hearing as a critic who advanced the reputations of Mies van der Rohe, then Louis Kahn, and, more recently, Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, and Robert A. M. Stern. As a pundit, socialite, patron of the Museum of Modern Art and of such artists as Jasper Johns, Frank Stella, and Robert Rauschenberg, Johnson has been both an ornament and a power within the worlds of architecture and the arts, and never more so than at the present moment.

Earlier this year, Johnson held star billing on public television's first major series on American architecture, *Pride of Place*. As a raconteur and camera presence, he was irresistible. Quick and engagingly wicked, Johnson far outshone the host of the show,

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Robert A. M. Stern. And Johnson's eightieth birthday has been accompanied by an avalanche of feverish praise, typified by Peter Eisenman's calling him, as quoted by Joseph Giovannini in *The New York Times,* the "most influential architect since Bernini." Such comparisons grow more inflated with the passing years (the Bernini analogy is an old chestnut by now); they are a function of Johnson's age, his snob appeal, his amusement value, and the fact that his work as a reputation-builder has put many in his debt.

But what about his architecture? Because of his role as a cultural eminence, Johnson is only rarely called to account for what his office builds. "His status," Giovannini writes, "gives him a near diplomatic immunity in design."[1] Johnson the wit has always had reporters eating out of his hand. And the fact that he is now also an immensely successful practicing architect has produced the painful spectacle of critics shuffling their feet. Paul Goldberger's comments on the AT&T building—Manhattan's first historicist tower—are a classic instance of critical to-ing and fro-ing about the quality of Johnson's architecture. Writing in the *Times,* Goldberger both dismissed AT&T as "flat" and "overblown" and celebrated it as "a remarkable architectural presence."[2] A refreshing exception to this kind of waffling is Ada Louise Huxtable, who has stood firm both in her enthusiasm for Pennzoil and in her criticism of AT&T.[3]

But how can an architect be "beyond controversy," as Joseph Giovannini has written, when he proposes to overwhelm Times Square with four massive towers topped by overscale mansard ("Fancy Hat") roofs, or shoehorn two million square feet of office space into the low-rise neighborhood of Boston's International Place? When you consider, by comparison, the degree of hostility directed at Michael Graves for his proposed addition to the Whitney Museum, Johnson would seem to walk the earth under some special dispensation. Yet the public has a greater stake than ever before in what Johnson is doing. When his bon mots have faded from memory, his towers will remain. It is as a builder that Philip Johnson must be judged, and what he is building is a scandal.

Johnson's skyscrapers answer the postmodern call for ornament and historicity with a startlingly crude literalness. These buildings include sleek sculptural towers such as Pennzoil, the Lipstick Building, and 101 California, where glass-enclosed volumes are molded into geometric forms. The ingenious Pennzoil is in the form of two interlocking trapezoids; 101 California, known as "the Silver Silo," is a forty-eight-story cylinder. In each of these towers, the arresting shape makes the entire building its own ornament. Then there are the high rises where the shape is a modernist "box," and only the decoration is "post." To these structures, Johnson has affixed such modishly traditional features as gables (on Chicago's La Salle Street), mansard roofs (at Times Square and 580 California), Palladian windows (at International Place), barrel-vaulted roofs (at New England Life and Momentum Place), crenellated turrets (at Federal Reserve Place), and, of course, the famous broken pediment (at AT&T).

The problem with Johnsonian postmodernism lies not so much with individual buildings—though several are out-and-out monstrosities—as with their very spirit. His buildings are cynical. Johnson would be the first to admit this, of course: flip self-criticism is a staple of his bad-boy persona, although it has gone to extreme lengths lately, even for him. In 1982, he delivered his famous "I am a whore" speech to a distinguished group of international architects gathered at the University of Virginia. (The proceedings have since been published in

1 "Philip Johnson Designs for a Pluralistic Age," by Joseph Giovannini; *The New York Times,* January 8, 1984, p. 36.

2 The quotations are from *The New York Times* of September 28, 1983, pages B1 and B9, respectively.

3 See Ada Louise Huxtable's article, "The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered," in the November 1982 issue of *The New Criterion.*

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book form in *The Charlottesville Tapes.*) When Cesar Pelli asked Johnson to justify his design for International Place in Boston, he replied: "I do not believe in principles . . . . I am a whore, and I am paid very well for building high-rise buildings."[4]

Johnson has been saying "I am a whore" since 1977 at least, and it gets less funny all the time. But Johnson's cynical verbiage does tell us something profound about his recent architecture. For his utterances are the spiritual equivalent of the soullessness characteristic of his buildings. In his commentary on the Charlottesville proceedings, Jaquelin Robertson, dean of the University of Virginia's School of Architecture, defines the effect of Johnson's recent work exactly when he charges him with responsibility for "the peculiar rich emptiness" typical of the latest American architecture.

Johnson's buildings feel empty because they are informed, like his wit, by a striving for dramatic short-term effects. As buildings, they are provocative, irreverent, culturally subversive, and glib. These can be attractive qualities in an after-dinner speech, but not in urban architecture on the scale Johnson's clients can afford. For we are not talking about witty experiments in plywood in somebody's backyard, in the manner of Frank Gehry. We are talking about forty-story experiments in granite on Madison Avenue.

Johnson's cynicism is an affront to his profession, particularly to the thinking younger architects whose design philosophy he would seem to share. For although ideologically Johnson appears to be a peer of architects like Michael Graves and Robert Venturi, as a builder he has long been out of their league. Johnson has been building on this colossal scale for years, where Venturi, for example, has yet to build a skyscraper and is only now emerging from the culture of paper architecture with significant museum commissions in London and Seattle. This has left Johnson in a position to define single-handedly, for the public, concepts that his postmodernist colleagues have explored with greater subtlety on a small scale. Not that a lot of what is called postmodernism isn't bad. But at least it has been modest. Such efforts belong to an experimental and pluralistic period in American architecture, in which numerous tendencies should be allowed to incubate, to be sorted out later. By rushing his own gargantuan historicist buildings into execution, Johnson is bringing this period to a premature conclusion.

Fifteen years ago, Johnson was in the right place to take advantage of two mutually reinforcing developments on the architecture scene. One was the rediscovery of the architect as a "prestige item" by corporations and by big-name real-estate developers such as Gerald Hines in Houston, for whom Johnson has designed more than a dozen buildings. As the chosen architect for AT&T, IDS, and the Hines projects, Johnson had by 1978 gained a track record as a designer of corporate superskyscrapers. Soon thereafter, the skyscraper itself began to be rediscovered by critics as an opportunity for elaborate architectural design.

In recent years, our two most visible critics, Ada Louise Huxtable and Paul Goldberger, have written at length in defense of the high-rise building. Although very different books, Goldberger's *The Skyscraper* (1981) and Huxtable's *The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered* (1983) took pains to remind us that the tall building is America's distinctive contribution to architecture. Both critics singled out for celebration the decorated skyscraper of the Twenties and Thirties, like New York's Woolworth and Chrysler buildings. Their measured appreciation of the decorated building coincided with an often philistine backlash against modernism, perhaps most visible in Tom Wolfe's *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1981). When Wolfe challenged American architects to "break out of the modernist 'box,'" Johnson and his clients were only too happy to oblige. Johnson broke out with a vengeance, producing trapezoids, four-pointed stars,

4 *The Charlottesville Tapes,* commentary by Jacquelin Robertson; Rizzoli, 218 pages, $25. Philip Johnson's comment appears on page 19.

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polyhedrons, gables, Gothic spires, turrets, and, in the case of 580 California, a mansard roof with toga-clad "classical" statues disporting themselves along the top.

Talk of statues in togas and mansard roofs would have been heresy to the young Philip Johnson. Born in 1906, he came of age with the modern movement and was one of its most avid champions in this country. While still an undergraduate at Harvard in the Twenties, Johnson became friends with Alfred Barr (then teaching a course in modern art at Wellesley), with Barr's wife Margaret Scolari, and with the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock. This aesthetically adventurous group travelled around Europe together, seeking out examples of work by such modernist pioneers as Mies, Gropius, Le Corbusier, and J. J. P. Oud, then little known in this country.

Three years after Alfred Barr founded the Museum of Modern Art in 1929, Johnson set up its Department of Architecture, with himself as curator. Even at this point in his career he was needling the architectural establishment. Along with Barr and the dealer Julien Levy, he staged a storefront show called "Rejected Architecture," a *salon des refusés* organized as an answer to the Architectural League, then dominated by followers of the Beaux Arts style of McKim, Mead and White.

In 1932 Johnson also launched the crusade for modern architecture in this country. Together with Hitchcock, he introduced his European favorites to the American public with the "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition" show at MOMA. In its catalogue, published under the title *The International Style,* Johnson shaped a welter of Miesian dictates into a coherent polemic, in which terms such as curtain wall and structural integrity entered the vocabulary of American architecture. Owing partly to the Depression and the Second World War, it was to be another twenty years before the exhibition's ideas were put into wide practice in America.

In 1934, what was to be a forty-seven-year career at MOMA was interrupted by a bizarre excursion into politics. That year, Johnson abruptly left the museum, announcing that he and the assistant director Alan R. Blackburn were going to start their own political party, modeled on the success of Huey Long in Louisiana. The two New Yorkers set off for Louisiana, which they very soon found inhospitable to their ambitions. In 1939, Johnson, who had spent many holidays in Germany, went to Berlin as a correspondent for Father Coughlin's journal *Social Justice.* The journalist William L. Shirer, who met Johnson while covering the invasion of Poland, called him a spy and "an American fascist" when he described this encounter in his book *Berlin Diary,* published in 1941. Johnson has managed to live down these associations with demagogues. When he was being considered for the MOMA board of trustees in 1957, Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III came to Johnson's rescue, saying "every young man should be allowed to make one large mistake."[5]

In 1940, having made his mark as a promoter of European modernism, Johnson decided to become an architect himself. At thirty-four, he cut quite a figure in the Harvard Graduate School of Design. As his thesis project, he built the first Miesian house in Cambridge and threw some memorable parties there. After two years in the army, he returned to MOMA, and at the same time set up an architectural office in New Canaan, Connecticut. (It took him several years, with cram courses, to pass the New York licensing exam.) Beginning with a Manhattan town house for Mrs. Rockefeller in 1948, Johnson began designing residences, galleries, libraries, museums, and a synagogue. By the Sixties he had carved out an important niche for himself as a designer of cultural institutions, among them the 1951 offices and the 1964 East Wing for MOMA, the 1961 Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, and the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery for the University of Nebraska (1963).

5 "Profiles: Forms Under Light," by Calvin Tomkins; *The New Yorker,* May 23, 1977, p. 46.

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Johnson's best work has always been done within *the* convention of the moment—his very best being done in imitation of Mies. Indeed, Johnson played a crucial role in establishing Mies in this country. When Mies was trying to leave Germany in 1937, Johnson and Barr got him a commission for the Resor ranch in Wyoming, and arranged the MOMA retrospective that introduced his work to the public in 1947. For his patronage of Mies alone, Johnson deserves an honored place in the history of American architecture. And he can be proud of his collaboration with Mies on the Seagram Building, which stands as one of the glories of classic modernism. In his interiors for the Four Seasons restaurant there, Johnson's theatrical bent finds its most delightful and appropriate expression.

Johnson's best-known building is his own 1949 Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. Here modernism's ideal of geometric purity found its American apogee. Although the Glass House was inspired by Mies's Farnsworth House, whose plans Johnson had seen before it was finished in 1950, Johnson's low, ground-hugging volume expresses a harmony with nature not attained by his Miesian model. By the late Fifties, Johnson had abandoned strict Miesianism. The rest of his career as a designer is passable by the standards of American practice, but hardly rises to the level of Johnson's standards as a critic. There are some large embarrassments, such as the glitzy New York State Theater, and some competent successes, such as the MOMA Sculpture Garden; the Dumbarton Oaks Pavilion in Washington, D.C.; the Fort Worth Water Garden, which shows the influence of Lawrence Halprin; and the Houston towers, which are designed in a sculptural idiom similar to that found in Kevin Roche's United Nations Plaza. The lesson of Johnson's first forty years in architecture is that he performs brilliantly as a promoter of others' talent, and respectably as an imitator of that talent. The lesson of his last, prolific decade is that he performs execrably when freed to be himself.

TATISTCHEFF

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But whatever one may think of Johnson's recent concoctions as architecture, there is a grating irony in what they represent as the capstone to a career launched in the principled atmosphere of early modernism. With his present opportunities to build, he is repudiating everything he once stood for, and with glee.

Since 1967, when he formed his partnership with John Burgee, a young Chicago architect who now runs the business side of the office, Johnson has had the chance to do large commercial complexes, thanks to his favored status with what Jaquelin Robertson has dubbed "the new patronage," i.e., the big developers. It is a status openly envied by other architects. "We cannot ignore [Johnson's] enthusiasm for the real estate community," Robertson remarked in his summary of *The Charlottesville Tapes,* "and his skill in responding to our new Emperor." What was left unsaid was that the work Johnson has done under "the new patronage" sets a horrifying example for the rest of the profession.

The least problematic buildings of Johnson's late phase are his purely geometric experiments in form. He has produced some striking pieces of architectural sculpture in the IDS Center in Minneapolis, in his round tower at the base of California Street in San Francisco, and in his Houston masterpiece, the twin trapezoids at Pennzoil Place. The best of these possess a powerful unity of aesthetic effect, reinforced by their relatively uncluttered settings, particularly in Houston, where greenery enhances the illusion of the tower as a jewel in its case.

By contrast, Johnson's historicist towers are pretentious, aesthetically confused, and vulgar. These are the charges that the modernists made fifty years ago against the impure historicism of nineteenth-century revivalism, and they apply with equal force to Johnson's proposed mansard-roofed Times Square group, 580 California, the gabled La Salle Street towers, and the Chippendale AT&T. All these buildings contain a "box" form with features rummaged up unsystematically from the attic of architectural history. Casual eclecticism is nothing new, of course. Johnson's designs take us back to the revival-style skyscrapers of the Twenties and Thirties—or would, if only they had the same genuine exuberance and careful crafting. It is not because they are eclectic that Johnson's decorated towers disappoint. One dislikes them because they are failed jokes and shoddy luxury items. There is something particularly joyless about their eclecticism, and a heavy, synthetic quality to the decoration prevents most of these buildings from even being amusing.

Nowhere is the emptiness of Johnson's historicism more depressingly evident than in the Neiman Marcus store in San Francisco. Here Johnson's professed respect for the past ("One cannot not know history," he once said[6]) was put to the test; for the project required the architect to retain part of a San Francisco landmark, Clinton Day's 1898 City of Paris department store.

A survivor of the 1906 earthquake and fire, the old City of Paris was a sentimental favorite for generations of San Franciscans. It boasted one rare and beautiful feature, a four-story rotunda embellished with plaster angels and enclosed in champagne-tinted glass. When Neiman Marcus announced its plans for demolition, local preservationists won a battle to save the rotunda, which had been called the most beautiful Beaux Arts room in the world.

Enter Philip Johnson, who was chosen to come up with a design preserving the rotunda. His solution was to demolish the rest of the original store, replacing it with a harlequin-patterned pink-and-white granite box, with the rotunda protruding from one corner as a formal entrance. When it was unveiled in 1982, the checkerboard Neiman Marcus became San Francisco's first example of the new decorated building. Its architect also claimed that it was a work of the new historicism, citing such farflung influences as Italian Renaissance marble patterning and the geometry of Mondrian.

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6 "Tower of Power," by Craig Unger; *New York Magazine,* November 15, 1982, p. 49.

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But the actual historic architectural remnant Johnson was charged with preserving, the Beaux Arts rotunda, was subjected to a degrading treatment. His new façade is completely at war with its turn-of-the-century interior: with its glossy granite and aluminum tubing, the exterior is all hard edges and cool metallic tones, while the rotunda is a tour de force of swirling lines, creamy plaster, and painted gilt. When these two disparate aesthetics meet, as they do at the entrance, visual mayhem results. We are dealing with different systems of architectural illusion here: both Day's painted plaster angels and Johnson's industrial fixtures need a certain suspension of disbelief to work their magic. By forcing them into collision, Johnson cruelly exposes the arbitrariness of each, making them both look cheap.

But of all the work in Johnson's latest phase, the most profoundly disturbing are his historicist superskyscrapers. These combine the gargantuan scale of his sculptural towers with his literal historicism. As in geometric volumes like the trapezoidal Pennzoil, the principal decorative element is the shape of the whole building. But in the historicist versions these shapes are not abstract but figurative, not a trapezoid but a "Chippendale" broken pediment, stripped of context and blown up to fantastic proportions. Thus the upper stories of Houston's RepublicBank erupt into a series of gigantic gables, and the reflecting glass of Pittsburgh's PPG is molded into a comic forest of Gothic spires.

What makes Johnson's historicism unique is its monumental scale. With the techniques available to him as a late-twentieth-century builder, he can mold enormous, glass-enclosed volumes as freely as the Victorian builder shaped wood. And he cannot seem to resist the temptation to take this power as far as possible. With the range of scale available in the forty-story office building, for example, he can take an element like a broken pediment, and inflate it to a size and place it at a height that are unprecedented and preposterous. So extreme are his manipulations of scale and materials that the familiarity of his traditional imagery is canceled out. The whole point of postmodern historicism is to reinforce the familiar associations of past architecture. This goal is completely subverted by Johnson, who succeeds in making the traditional seem strange through his feats of distortion.

The one case where Johnson's propensities toward the gigantic and symbolic seem appropriate is not an urban commercial tower but a sprawling suburban church. This is the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California. A great open shed, whose faceted glass and metalwork surface forms a four-pointed star, Johnson's Cathedral fits its function as a meeting hall for up to three thousand followers of evangelist Robert H. Schuller. Here, neither the ready-made California religion, the suburban neighborhood, nor the vaguely festive star image have a history vulnerable to subversion. In the Crystal Cathedral, the whimsy is exhilaratingly innocent, free of Johnson's usual parodic edge.

Such, unhappily, is not the case with the imagery borrowed from the architecture of the past. To render Gothic spires in glass instead of stone or masonry, as Johnson does at PPG, or to inflate gables to the overscale proportions of the RepublicBank, or mansard roofs and Palladian arches to their enormous size at Times Square, is to render them grotesque. Comparable feats of distortion in visionary architects such as Ledoux and Boullée produce a feeling of wonder. In Johnson, the effect is alienating. Instead of bringing the public into a comfortable acquaintance with the architectural past, Johnson's historicist monstrosities place us at an even greater distance from it. Those who are still ranting about the feeling of alienation produced by the modernist high-rise should try to cozy up to one of Johnson's "traditional" buildings.

Johnson's use of "tradition" makes a mockery of the postmodernist program of rescuing the past. The use of gables, porticos, keystones, and the like by Robert A. M. Stern, Michael Graves, Robert Venturi, and

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others, however stagey, is intended to rehabilitate these elements for popular use. Like Johnson, they distort these borrowed features in an effort to avoid mere replication. Like him, they try too hard to be amusing. Wit has an exaggerated currency among this generation of architects, who must feel they have to define themselves against the earnestness and moralism of their modernist teachers. ("My work is an emancipation from that architctural morality," Johnson has said.[7])

Certainly there is playfulness in Graves's exaggerated keystones and Venturi's quirky variations on the gable. But none of them go as far as Johnson, whose irony edges over into nihilism. By using the same stock of features and treating them to such violations of scale, Johnson is giving his fellow historicists a bad name, especially with clients, who, like the consumers of Camp art, must eventually catch on to the fact that they, too, are being made fun of. Part of the Johnson/Burgee mystique for the profession is that, as Jaquelin Robertson writes, "Philip and John can get their developer clients to do anything." When he is called upon to explain his designs before official bodies, Johnson doesn't bother to conceal his contempt for his public's taste. He flaunts it. Defending his Boston International Place scheme at the University of Virginia seminar, he sounded like an antiques dealer trying to sell a fake. "You notice the medieval overtones, perhaps in the top slits, and the eighteenth-century overtones in the Palladian window motifs."

Johnson's cynicism is so profound it degrades everyone it touches: the great architects of the past, who are ripped off to be parodied; his contemporaries, whose didactic program has been co-opted and subverted; his clients, who are assumed to be too stupid to know what they are buying; and, worst of all, the public, which is going to have to live with these monstrosities long after their creator is dead.

Johnson has played the bad boy all his life. When he was young, his rebellion had a suitable object, in the smugness and aesthetic confusions of pre-modern revival styles. Twenty years ago, his irreverence found a worthy opponent in entrenched modernist doctrine. Now, at the end of his life, Johnson is ever more the brave little boy battling the grown-ups. And the stakes are higher now, since he is building, not just talking. But who are these grown-ups? The stranglehold of modernism has already been broken. The so-called establishment is in disarray. What architecture needs from its "dean" is not a gadfly but a leader. But Johnson's influence is wholly destructive, an act of cultural unbuilding in the name of building.

"I put the nail in the coffin of modernism with AT&T," Johnson has boasted. The graveyard image suits his current role as death-giver to whatever stylistic conventions American architecture has left. His late work fulfills a twenty-year trend toward the formal dismemberment of the modernist tower. In the trapezoidal Pennzoil and the cylindrical 101 California, Johnson takes one step in liberating the tower from the "box." In the figurative PPG and RepublicBank buildings, he takes the tower beyond geometry altogether. But these figurative buildings resurrect historical forms only to render them ridiculous. The ultimate direction of Johnson's work is toward the destruction of all notion of form.

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7 From an interview with Philip Johnson, "Architect Touts New San Francisco Creation"; *The Oakland Tribune,* December 11, 1984, p. 13.

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Art

At the beginning of the season

by Jed Perl

On Fifty-seventh Street the male nude may be superseding his female counterpart as an object for casual erotic daydreams in art. Gay culture has its part in this, but the new male eroticism also has a transcultural appeal. Women's bodies don't any longer work so very well as decor. The public now spends its days dressed in his-and-her business suits, and is bored by both the pre-feminist view of woman as a tasty morsel in the boudoir and the feminist idea of a woman's body as a battlefield over which the sexual wars are waged. In the paintings of Rainer Fetting and the photographs of Bruce Weber—which were at the Marlborough and Robert Miller galleries in September—the male nude has the chic of a newly hatched subject.

Rainer Fetting's *Stunde der Rose* ("Hour of the Rose") shows a dark-haired boy lying in the buff on a couch, a glass of red wine in one hand, a red rose at his feet. In another Fetting a black boy, Desmond, stands with nothing on in a pose that reveals all at once his buttocks, his broad back, and a three-quarter view of his face. These boys also appear in groups, sometimes with women, on the New York tenement roofs and New Jersey piers where Fetting's crowd goes to sunbathe and party; the skyline is always there in the background, an emblem of the city. Fetting handles paint in a rough, casual manner; his abrupt light-into-dark chiaroscuro and straight-from-the-tube colors are reminiscent of the work of the 1950s Bay Area realist David Park. Fetting might have learned to draw from one of those correspondence programs that used to advertise in the subways and on the covers of matchbooks: he jots down jaws and eye sockets and lips with diagrammatic casualness. His young men are a compendium of cliché attractions—comic-strip good looks, often revised to fit a negroid type. The high arch of a cheekbone and the straight line of a nose recall the covers of romance novels, only Fetting gives the stereotypes a high-art twist by jazzing up the color with ideas snitched from Ernst Kirchner and Edvard Munch.

The dramatic tingle in Fetting's show had something to do with the juxtaposition of an urban setting and the naked boys. The city is a strange, grimy, and garish backdrop for this new democracy of the undressed. Standing bolt upright with his back to us on a Hudson River pier, or turning to meet the artist's gaze in the studio, each of these boys seems to be transforming himself into a piece of living sculpture. Fetting's bust-length self-portrait, barechested, in a large hat, reveals him as another young man—one among equals. Like the artist himself, the boys may come from abroad (he's German-born); or from the provinces; or from the ghetto. They may well be Fetting's friends and lovers. But the salient fact is that they've got what Andy Warhol promised, their fifteen minutes of fame, in a once-upon-a-time story in which you undress and become a prince of the city, up there on the walls of the Marlborough Gallery.

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Bruce Weber's photographs of young men have none of the headachy, expectant aura that's churned up by Fetting's brushwork; they're all the more the perfect Eighties ingenues. In the travelogue world of Weber's recent book, *O Rio de Janeiro,*[1] and the accompanying exhibit at the Robert Miller Gallery, young men fill the decorative visual interlude that used to belong to women. Weber's style, which is rather Art Deco and cool and severe in the fashion pages he does for magazines like *GQ* and *Interview,* moves here in the direction of the informal snapshot and the randomly cropped tabloid image. While much of the story in *O Rio de Janeiro* involves the crowds of dark-eyed and dark-haired urchins on the beaches and the partying in local joints and a family of jiujitsu wrestling champions, in the quieter moments back in the rooms at the hotel the lighting gets a little dim and what you see, just beyond a chair heaped with clothes or a table with the remains of a meal, is a young man in his brief swim trunks or underpants. Part of the effect of Weber's show, like Fetting's, seems to rest in the repetitiveness of the types. Not one, but many of Weber's young men look like Greek gods. These are heroes for an Age of Mechanical Reproduction. The clonelike proliferation of Weber's blank Adonises and of Fetting's campy night people has a leveling effect. Beauty is to be found in the health-club workout, or in the right way of meeting the gazes of the people at the clubs.

Seven years ago, when Robert Mapplethorpe hung a series of photographs of homosexual sadomasochistic sex on the walls of the Robert Miller Gallery, the pornographic imagination was supposed to give gallery art a good kick in the pants. Pornography is still occasionally exploited for its shock value in the galleries downtown; but more often of late there's an attempt to defuse the scandal of pornography and give the male nude a broad—and commercial—appeal. Mapplethorpe's recent shows have been pretty mild. Another artist who now exhibits at Miller, Robert Greene, does romantic scenes of Central Park at twilight, in which among the dog walkers one can encounter the little surprise of a muscle-clad guy. The male nude has gone from hard-core to soft-core in a matter of a couple of years. Stylishness, not sex, is the ultimate aphrodisiac these days.

A peregrination through the galleries in September left one with many thoughts, few of which were exactly about works of art. Something like the portrait of Adolf Hitler by Albert Oehlen, included in the "What It Is" group show at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in Soho, mostly raised the question of how one ought to respond to the damn thing. Every reaction was too large or too small to fit this Andy Warhol-style job, done in primary-school red, yellow, blue, and black. Shafrazi's show was accompanied by a sixty-page, full-color catalogue, which was conceived, edited, and designed by the curator of the exhibition, a German by the name of Wilfried Dickhoff; the catalogue contains photographic portraits of the artists and a lot of creative layout work, but it leaves one pretty much in the dark as to what "What It Is" is or was about. The show's title seems to derive from an essay by Mayo Thompson which, as it happens, is printed next to a photograph of Albert Oehlen. (The essay is called "Representation of Representation of is not as easy as it looks like it looks".) Thompson begins as follows:

> An interesting exchange was heard recently at an "opening" in an art gallery:
> Artist 1: Your work is shit.
> Artist 2: It is what it is.

From here the essay proceeds to explain that the phrase "'It is what it is' . . . reflects the effect of the hegemony of laissez-faire, pluralist ideology—here expressed in the form of a classic zen-historicism—in the productive sphere." In plain English this may translate to "anything goes." The particular flatulent stupidity of the entire catalogue and show is probably best expressed in the "Five

1 *O Rio de Janeiro,* by Bruce Weber; Knopf, $60.

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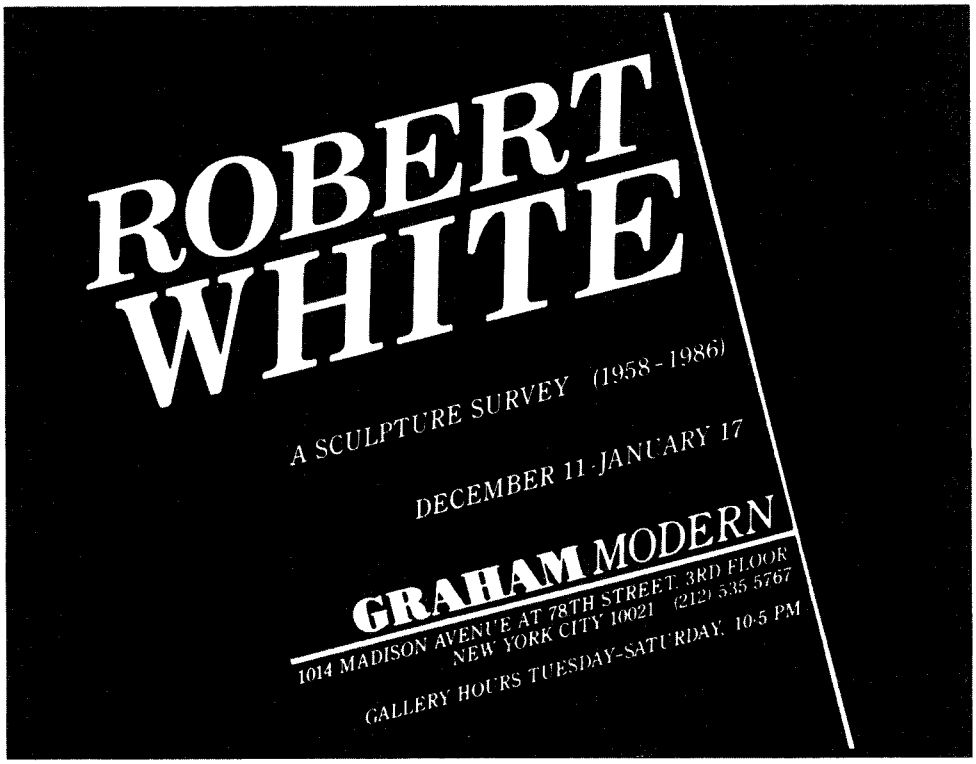

questions" offered by the painter Donald Baechler, who in his photograph looks to be the age of a college freshman.

1 What are your favorite diseases?
2 Are your paintings answers or questions?
3 How often do you shave?
4 What photographs do you use for masturbation?
5 Are you religious, or in business?

Is Donald Baechler's quiz an example of "laissez-faire, pluralist ideology"—or of "classic zen-historicism"? Do we care?

The dozens of fall group shows, which are meant to tell us where the art scene is headed, are in fact a murky nightmare in the face of which one's powers of analysis feel cruelly tried. Fall group shows used to be a means by which galleries announced their season's lineup; but now they include more than just the artists to whom a gallery plans to give one-man shows. The goal is to suggest what will happen next, city-wide or even globally—and thereby get a jump on the zeitgeist. The individual artist is an element in an ensemble, and the more-than-the-sum-of-its-parts effect of these shows is underlined by the frequent practice of leaving the artists' names off the walls. The works seem to belong to the galleries rather than to their creators. This arrangement also encourages the carefully cultivated in-sy appeal of so many shows. You're supposed to recognize the work of all these young painters and sculptors without looking up their names on the typed sheet that's sitting at the reception desk. But you can only know all the names by sight if you go to all the exhibits and read all the reviews and keep yourself generally attuned to the very new.

Who goes to see the group shows? Though a few artists, critics, collectors, and museum people do make the rounds, the shows are probably mounted with art consultants—the galleries' most important paying public—in mind. The consultants—who work free-lance or for corporations—function nowadays as a liaison between the art world and the monied class. They rationalize

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the whole process of tastemaking, so that business and professional people with no immediate link to art can buy into its prestige. Art consultants don't in general have strong personal taste; but they read the magazines and watch carefully what the galleries are pushing and on the basis of all this they come to conclusions about what will be hanging in the corporate boardrooms and offices and hallways, as well as in the living rooms and video dens of the rich and nearly rich. The good art consultants have figured out who will be reviewed in *Art in America* and *Artforum* nine months hence. They're the unwitting enemies of all true innovation, because they want art to proceed in a readily predictable fashion. The group shows are a clearinghouse of artistic futures; artists get points on the basis of how many important shows they will get into in the course of a season. The galleries must have a kind of unwritten agreement with each other: you give my guy or gal a push, and I'll do the same for yours. The hope is that each gallery will end up with a couple of box-office stars.

This fall we're in a retro glut, and most galleries are slicing off a piece—or a couple of pieces—from the art-historical pie. Some galleries have new artists recycling old styles; others just recycle the old artists. Gary Indiana of *The Village Voice* calls it "Neatly Timed Flashback." In the East Village, Hal Bromm had a show called "Non Objective," which proposed a rerun of 1960s and 1970s Minimalism. One of Don Judd's multi-colored metal boxes presided over a room full of objects which were attached to long-established names. One imagined the phone calls to the artists, most of whom have never really left the limelight, all of whom must have been pleased to be invited to exhibit at Avenue A and East Eleventh Street, in the neighborhood where it's at. Around the corner from Bromm, at Jack Shainman, the show was "The New Metaphysical Dream: Seven Italian Painters." The theme here was lost pastorals and collapsing classicism, and all interest focused on the casting call for artists. Jack Shainman passed over the old war horses like de Chirico and the young war horses like Cucchi, to bring us a school of Italian unknowns who definitely have the neo-metaphysical and neo-neoclassical mannerisms down pat. There was nothing much to look at at Shainman, only the flurry of rising reputations, hopeful initiates in the New York fraternity.

From the evidence of the group shows, Lydia Dona is a comer this year. Her abstractions, which consist of rectangular and circular forms rather ponderously inscribed all over a surface colored geranium-red or mustard-yellow, are crude cousins of the architectural fantasies of Viera da Silva. Dona's work recapitulates the duller aspects of post-World War II European abstraction. Who would ever have dreamed her work would be fashionable in New York in 1986? But then the retro craze can make anything look new. Dona was in the group show at Luhring, Augustine & Hodes, a Fifty-seventh Street gallery that trades in East Village taste right down the hall from André Emmerich. At Luhring, Augustine & Hodes, Dona's work looked like a send-up of traditional abstraction; downtown at Rosa Esman, in more tasteful surroundings, there was perhaps an argument being advanced that Dona was actually a good artist. Esman's show was called "Painting: Abstraction Rediscovered"—to which one might respond:"?!" The extraordinary badness and thinness of Dona's painting was nothing compared to the achievement of getting into two important autumn shows. But even when the painting itself is somewhat better, as is the case with the abstractions of Willy Heeks, which were also at Esman, the modicum of pleasure to be gotten from the artist's handling of a gritty paint surface and from the attractive combination of black and yellow ochre seemed irrelevant beside the larger fact that painterly abstraction was once again "in."

To look at painting as painting in these group shows is a labor; the surprise of what's-being-shown-now keeps shifting one's attention to the scorecard, the fashion forecast. The pressure must be exciting career-

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wise, but it has to be hell for any artist who's really trying to paint or sculpt. In Heek's case (he's in his mid-thirties), the talent may already have been put too far forward all at once—there's a straining to be liked. For something in the neighborhood of Abstract Expressionism, I prefer Harry Kramer's *Gull II,* which was in the group show at Gruenebaum. The Kramer—a maroon-gray surface which has been churned up all over—might not hold us for very long, but it has the authority of its sensibility. You feel something happening between the artist and the canvas. Some of the best things to be seen in September were at galleries, like Gruenebaum and Bowery, that stand outside the marketing marathon. At Bowery, I admired Temma Bell's trio of tiny, casually brushed apple-green views of upstate New York farmland. Also Barbara Goodstein's *Pietà,* a near-abstract meditation on a late painting by Botticelli, done in the artist's white-plaster-on-black-plywood relief technique. For Goodstein, who reduces figures to the most abbreviated calligraphic signs, the relation between nature and abstraction is apparently tenuous, poignant. There's passion in Goodstein's *Pietà*—but the passion has been tightly controlled, and it's turned melancholy and cool.

The fad for group shows suggests a fading of the cult of personality which peaked only a few years ago with the emergence of Julian Schnabel and David Salle. I've recently heard a number of people wonder whether anyone—an artist, a critic—could today maintain the authority that figures like de Kooning and Greenberg achieved a generation ago. The scene now seems to defuse or dissolve the force of anything with which it comes into contact. It's hard to take a stand when what's beneath your feet and all around is quicksand. For anyone who says "yes" there's someone who will be glad to say "no" exactly as loud. Even the smartest attacks launched against the scene generally ring false: they sound like the self-indulgent arguments of couples who ought to have gotten divorced years ago.

What's really new in the past year or two is the collapse of style as a means of self-definition and communal identification for the artist. Membership in the camp of the geometric or painterly or realist painters never assured the quality of one's work, but it used to signify a general attitude on the part of the artist, a sense of one's relation to the past. To say one was working out of Abstract Expressionism or Neoclassicism suggested a value system, a vantage point. You can't assume that anymore, now that style has become something in the nature of party dress, to be put on and taken off at will. It's as likely now that someone who works in an Abstract Expressionist vein is criticizing Abstract Expressionism as connecting with it. The thought that any style can signify anything may, on the face of it, seem exhilarating, but what it really creates is chaos.

The gallery scene, which went in the past decade from bust to boom, now resembles a party that's still going strong, though all the guests secretly wonder if they really want to be present. Back in the 1970s, when easel painting and medium-sized sculpture were in critical disrepute, the gallery system faced a major identity crisis. Fashionable art was either too ephemeral and inexpensive (mail art, photography), or too large and unsaleable (earthworks) to be of much use to the well-heeled commercial dealer. Aside from economic improvement, what has happened in the Eighties is that the artists, the dealers, and the critics have come to some kind of unholy alliance. Ninety percent of the art that's touted today consists of variants on the anti-object—on the work of art that criticizes the idea of art. The surprise is that the saleable gallery object itself can be an anti-object. Too much has been made of the distinction between hot and cool styles, between expressionist painting and Minimalism of the NeoGeo variety. (NeoGeo is what geometric abstraction is called when it's exhibited on the Lower East Side.) Tony Shafrazi, whose "What It Is" group show had no stylistic coherence, probably understands more about the col-

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lapse of stylistic distinctions than any of the critics. If Mary Boone can sell both a 1960s Minimalist like Artschwager (whom she was showing in October) and an appropriationist like David Salle, we should accept the fact that her clients see as many connections between the two as differences. To quote a broadside that was given out at "When Attitude Becomes Form," a show which was right across Mercer Street from Shafrazi at the Bess Cutler Gallery, "The work is a 'questioning object' that may reveal more about the viewer than it does about itself." An artwork—whether NeoEx or NeoGeo—is just the suggestion of a theme, on which the viewer creates a series of personal riffs. The art world is (according to Bess Cutler's brochure) "some sort of magnificent, sprawling theme park." The purchaser takes the work home to his or her own personal theme party (or to use the old term, art collection).

It's hard not to feel depressed going through the group shows, but at least in Soho the life of the streets—especially during the weekdays, when it's mostly the local residents who are around—has some beauty to it. Soho is one area where gentrification hasn't yet passed into the hands of the big real-estate wheeler-dealers; you can still enjoy the love that's gone into the freshened-up façades of factory buildings, and appreciate the personal note in the decor of whatever first-generation food stores and galleries remain. At Paula Cooper's Donald Judd show, which opened at the beginning of October, it was cheering to be in the presence of an artist who's attuned to the scale and textures of Soho—to its open, unadorned loft spaces, and its unpretentious yet imaginative use of simple industrial materials. Judd's work always strikes me as pretty empty when I see it in group shows or museums; he's one of those artists who can't sustain his mood in mixed company. But in the two-gallery show he had at Leo Castelli in 1985, and in his new show at Paula Cooper (an old Soho gallery which he's just joined), the work takes on an authority that comes from the artist's ties with the life of the community.

Cheap space first attracted artists to Soho, and the high ceilings, large windows, and long perspectives can provide a serene, euphoric feeling that's very rare in the city. To these spaces artists brought a combination of do-it-yourself ingenuity and less-is-more idealism. A classic Soho loft is the creation of a sort of philosopher of the lumberyard and hardware store who dreams a bit even as he's scraping and sanding and painting and getting the shower installed. Don Judd's work, with its simple ideas and its surfaces of plywood and metal and concrete and plastic, comes right out of the sessions at the lumberyard and the browsings through the industrial materials catalogues. To the idea that an old factory could be a home, Judd added the idea that a crate of metal or plywood could be a sculpture. You can almost hear the artist, as he waits to be served at the hardware store, saying to himself, "Why couldn't this be a work of art?" What's impressive about Judd's work is that he makes the transition from factory to gallery without irony and without making us feel that he's overplayed his hand. Don Judd is the Bernini of Soho: as Bernini's fountains bring together two thousand years of Roman art and history, so Judd's boxes make a little essence of twenty years of life below Houston Street. The thinness of the Judds as works of art—and the obviousness of the ideas on which they're based—reflect the thinness of the world out of which they arose. Judd's work can't transcend its moment; but Lord knows there's little enough around that just epitomizes its moment, which Judd's work certainly does. Even the announcement for the Paula Cooper show—a rectangular card with the artist's name spelled out in tall, simple red letters—was in its own way an inspired thing.

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Dance

Naughty but nice

by Eva Resnikova

What could account for the extraordinary run on tickets for the British dance group Michael Clark & Company at the Brooklyn Academy's Next Wave Festival? Partly it's that they were booked into BAM's intimate Lepercq Space; but mostly it was the media blitz that preceded them. Clark, whose style is often described in the press as "post-punk," is a publicist's dream. His shaved head, blackened lips, and tutu-clad body enliven the pages of countless glossy magazines—most startlingly in an ad for another British import, Rose's lime juice, where he can be seen reclining, odalisque-fashion, at the feet (more precisely, between the legs) of pre-punk *danseuse* Ann Miller.

Watching Clark's ninety-minute offering, *No Fire Escape in Hell,* I was struck by how difficult it is to be outrageous today, when virtually everything that can be done onstage already has been. If one is young enough, however, and therefore has a limited dance-viewing experience, one might indeed be led to believe that what one is doing is original and even shocking. Clark was born in 1962, the same year the Judson Dance Theatre presented its first concert, generally considered to mark the birth of what came to be known as "postmodern" dance, and the catalogue of devices he avails himself of in *No Fire Escape* reads like a primer of Sixties experimental dance: nudity and sexual imagery; a rock score interspersed with snatches of speech; costumes with strategically placed holes or incongruous objects dangling from them; men partnering each other; performers leaving the stage and interacting with the audience; political protest; lights shined into the audience's eyes; even the obligatory grumpy opening-night review in the *Times* ("a premature debut").

Obviously, Clark means to *épater les bourgeois.* The problem this *bourgeoise* had with *No Fire Escape in Hell,* however, was that these avant-garde trappings were employed in such a genial, unthreatening manner that they became mere gestures, devoid not only of shock value but of any emotional or intellectual impact. The blinding stage lights were turned on for only a few seconds; the audience interaction involved an obvious "plant"; the exposed genitals were prostheses. All this serves merely to confirm the enlightened "liberal" values of the audience (and the corporate sponsor); Clark never goes so far as to make us genuinely uncomfortable or lead us to question these values. As a result, one observes it all dispassionately, as one would watch, say, MTV. The aspect that this viewer found truly offensive, the deafening music, was probably not even intended as such. Since the tape was playing when the audience entered and was left on during the intermission, it seems likely that Clark actually felt he was doing us a favor, like the aerobics instructors at my health club who generously leave on the ear-splitting disco beat for the rest of us to enjoy after their classes have ended.

The dancing itself tended to get lost

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among the trappings. (It's hard to see choreography when a dancer's *développé* reveals crudely outlined genitals sketched in the crotch of her costume.) Only one brief passage stood out, a solo in which Clark showed evidence of his early training at the Royal Ballet School: a flowing line, clean beats, and—if it is possible to invoke the word in this context—a noble presence. The dancing of the rest of the troupe ranged from the unremarkable to the incompetent, though it must be difficult to find serious dancers willing to perform in anatomically correct unitards.

The most obvious influence is Merce Cunningham, which is unsurprising considering that Clark's initial professional association was at Ballet Rambert with Richard Alston, a Cunningham alumnus. But Clark has merely appropriated some of the superficial aspects of Cunningham technique, rending it from the formal context from which it derives its aesthetic meaning. An important part of this context is a performing area with no fixed front, but Clark uses a traditional proscenium stage and wings. Cunningham's musical accompaniment is often as offensively loud, but it is intended merely as aural scenery; the sophisticated internal rhythms of his choreography provide the "musical" interest. Clark's score offered only a banal rock beat, to which the choreography responded in Mickey Mouse fashion. Props and costumes are of paramount importance to Clark; but unless he aspires to be an X-rated *Mummenschanz,* these are not enough upon which to base a dance theater.

This leaves us with literary content, which is largely sexual, and specifically homosexual. Toward the beginning of the piece there are two scenes of violence toward homosexuals. In the first, some grotesque caricatures of policemen break up a tender all-male love-in, and then one of the officers forces his prisoner to perform fellatio on him. In the second, Clark, clad only in a ruffled white apron and a dance belt, with a phallus attached in the appropriate spot, dances happily (dare one say gaily?) until another male figure notices and proceeds to castrate him. Lest we think that police commit mindless violence only against homosexual men, there is the previously mentioned audience-participation scene in which a woman is brutally ejected from the theater. (She tried to make an unnoticed return during intermission but was greeted with a round of applause from the audience.)

Turning to the playbill for possible enlightenment, we discover several laconic annotations. The first act is identified as "Then"; it contains a devil figure (female). Adam and Eve put in an appearance in the second act, "Now Gods." There is an epigraph from Jung: "We are placed in situations in which the great 'principles' entangle us and we are left to find a way out." There is also a dedication: "In memory of Trojan: way out was his way in."

Clark obviously had something in mind but seems unwilling to share it with us. "Great principles" could mean just about anything. "Trojan" appears to be an inside joke, which doesn't do those of us on the outside any good. Unless it's intended as an oblique reference to certain sexual practices associated with ancient Greece . . . or could his dedication be meant as an ode to the device that makes possible "safe sex" in today's hazardous erotic arena? In truth, both these possibilities seem overly sophisticated in the present context. Even recognizing that "way out" and "way in" are the British expressions for exit and entrance, the point of the wordplay remains murky. The probability that the endeavor to be "way out" represents the totality of Clark's artistic credo begins to appear disturbingly likely.

In the end, Clark has produced a mildly titillating anti-Establishment entertainment: a *Hair* for the Eighties (*Scalp,* one might call it, since the most hirsute cast member, male or female, sported only a conventionally short men's haircut). In the words of Johnny Mercer's mock striptease, Clark is "naughty but nice." This might have been cute in the Hollywood of the Fifties, but one hopes for more in the Brooklyn of the Eighties.

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Books

Wishing for a Wellsian world

by Terry Teachout

Nobody would have been more surprised at the current revival of interest in H. G. Wells than Wells himself. "They're as dead as mutton, you know," he cheerfully told Somerset Maugham one day while stroking a volume of the Atlantic Edition of his complete works. "They all dealt with matters of topical interest and now that the matters aren't topical any more they're unreadable."

The Second World War gave added force to this offhand remark. "In the public mind," Anthony West, Wells's illegitimate son by Rebecca West, has noted, "he [now] stood for everything that the experience of total war and the fascist years had shown to be facile and false in liberal meliorism." Even Wells himself appeared to jettison the ebullient optimism of his youth at war's end, arguing in *Mind at the End of Its Tether* that "the end of everything we call life is close at hand and cannot be evaded." The inevitable critical eclipse quickly followed Wells's death in 1946. His serious novels were allowed to go out of print, dismissed by fashionable critics as artistically inferior to the hastily written scientific romances, while his papers ended up at the University of Illinois, there to join the literary remains of other forgotten Edwardians.

Yet a modest Wells revival is apparently under way, one which began with the Virago Press reissue of *Ann Veronica,* Wells's 1909 novel about the sexual emancipation of a young woman. It picked up speed when the Hogarth Press brought out a series of Wells reprints, resurrecting titles like *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harman* and *Christina Alberta's Father,* which one never expected to see again outside the stacks of the New York Public Library. Now David C. Smith, a professor of history at the University of Maine, has consolidated these auguries of growing interest in H. G. Wells by writing the first Wells biography based mainly on primary sources, a book bearing the portentous title *H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal.*[1]

If nothing else, the appearance of Mr. Smith's book reminds us of the need for a satisfactory biography of Wells. Anthony West's 1984 *H. G. Wells: Aspects of a Life* is a sour, disorganized exercise in score-settling, mostly against Henry James and Rebecca West, while Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie's 1973 *H. G. Wells: A Biography* is basically a good popular biography rather than a full-scale literary study. One is thus favorably disposed in advance toward this more ambitious undertaking. Suspicions, however, are likely to be aroused as early as the dedication page, where one learns that this new biography is inscribed "to *JOSHUA* in the heartfelt hope and desire that his world might turn out to be a Wellsian one." The heart sinks at the sight of so fatuous a dedication. Great biographies have often been written by staunch partisans. (What is Leon Edel if not a Jamesian?) But Mr.

1 *H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal,* by David C. Smith; Yale University Press, 634 pages, $29.95.

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Smith's dedication, implying as it does both deficient taste and a wholly uncritical acceptance of the "Wellsian" vision, goes well beyond mere partisanship.

The ominous note sounded here is, in fact, that of hagiography, a biographical sin of which the author of *H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* is guilty in the first degree. Discussions of what Mr. Smith insists on referring to as "Wellsian thought" are consistently marked by a fawning tone. ("He still speaks to us all—and a Wellsian world awaits, as it has always done, for those who are willing to use their brains and their will.") Stories that show Wells in less than heroic light are frequently smoothed over or left out altogether. Somerset Maugham's acid memoir of Wells in *The Vagrant Mood,* for example, is not cited, nor is anything said about George Orwell's well-known 1941 wrangle with Wells over Orwell's essay of that year entitled "Wells, Hitler and the World State." Passages from *Mind at the End of Its Tether* are carefully selected to conceal the abject nihilism of this final outburst of a cheated prophet. Also missing are such tart criticisms of Wells's lifelong progressivism as Malcolm Muggeridge's mordant dismissal of *Mind at the End of Its Tether:* "It was as though, on the last day, a Salvation Army band paraded with its colours flying, only to turn tail and run when the earth began to shake and the heavens to unroll like a scroll."

An even more revealing example of Mr. Smith's disposition to marmorealize can be found in his account of Wells's 1906 meeting with Theodore Roosevelt. Though cursory mention of the meeting is made, no details are supplied, least of all the salacious ones which Wells dutifully recorded in the recently published "Postscript" to his 1934 *Experiment in Autobiography*:

> Our conversation was posed at a high level. After I left him that afternoon, I had a reaction. The air was warm and languorous, and I had nothing to do before dinner. I was faced by a frightful stretch of empty time, and at the time I did not want to think any more about my White House conversation. I called a cab and told the driver to take me to a "gay house." This was before the moral purgation of Washington. "White or Coon?" he said. It seemed to me that I ought to experience the local colour at its intensest. "Coon," said I.

The bald way in which Wells recounts this episode calls to mind *My Secret Life* or the memoirs of Frank Harris. But it would hardly have fit into Mr. Smith's worshipful portrait of "a man for all times," and so, like scores of luridly flavored Wellsian anecdotes, it has been passed over in silence.

Uncritical admiration is but one of Mr. Smith's offenses. He also suffers from a particularly disabling case of definitive biography syndrome. The symptoms are familiar. Each page of an overlong book is needlessly lengthened by the random accumulation of innumerable factual trivialities. ("Wells spent nineteen days on the general anatomy of the mammal, supplemented by detailed work on a sheep's brain, an ox eye, and a dog's larynx.") The writing style is unfailingly prolix, inconsecutive, and clumsy. Signs of careless editing are frequent. (Walter Lippmann's name is consistently misspelled throughout the book, even in the index.) Worst of all, Mr. Smith has no sense of drama whatsoever, an artistic deficiency which makes it possible for him to wrap up Wells's poverty-stricken childhood and apprenticeship as a draper in a mere eight pages. (The MacKenzies, by contrast, give Wells's early life 47 pages out of 487.)

While the fact that David C. Smith is a professor of history rather than of literature may account for these lapses it in no way justifies them. For Mr. Smith has knowingly chosen as his subject a man about whom it is impossible to write from the single perspective of either history or literature. Regarded by Henry James and Joseph Conrad as a potentially great novelist, Wells chose instead to become a popular journalist, one who sought to shape history as much as to record it. It is this latter side of Wells which Mr. Smith feels compelled to emphasize, and his book reflects this historian's bias in a very

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concrete way. *The Outline of History,* for instance, receives eleven pages of discussion, while *Tono-Bungay,* one of Wells's most important novels, is disposed of in two.

The problem is not so much one of balance as of what Mr. Smith chooses to do with the limited amount of space he devotes to Wells's fiction. He shows absolutely no understanding of the literary mind, and no appreciation of literature as a body of work worth discussing on its own terms. Novels are for him an inferior form of social documentation, to be judged solely by their "progressive" social content. Thus he completely fails to grasp the significance of the celebrated dispute between Wells and Henry James on the nature and purpose of fiction. ("Although the conventional wisdom is that he lost the battle of purpose to Henry James, that is a very superficial judgment, and one, incidentally, that needs new thought from many sources.") And his summary thoughts on Wells's fiction are inane:

> Although critics since, and Wells himself from time to time, have been concerned "about a certain streak of slovenliness which seems to be an almost unavoidable defect in me", as he phrased it in his introduction to [*When the Sleeper Wakes*], even with this streak of vulgar, or sloppy, work, his output was enormous. The top level of his work during the period, even with the "streak," is still read, and will likely be read as long as this language is written.

Mr. Smith's literary insensitivity is particularly damaging to his commentaries on the social novels, the series of semi-autobiographical narratives written between 1900 and 1916 in which Wells's strongest claims to being a major novelist are to be found. The early scientific romances[2] are correctly regarded as enduring classics of science fiction. The post-1916 "discussion" novels, those garrulous exercises in collectivist sermonizing with forbidding titles like *The Bulpington of Blup, The Autocracy of Mr. Parham,* and *The World of William Clissold,* are justifiably forgotten and will doubtless never be revived. But it is with the social novels—*Kipps, Tono-Bungay, The New Machiavelli, Ann Veronica*—that Mr. Smith must come to terms, and it is his failure to discuss them with any degree of critical penetration that leaves a black hole at the center of an already dangerously hollow book.

That H. G. Wells was at one time a novelist to be reckoned with is a matter of record. "It seems to be pretty generally agreed by the critics, at least in the United States," H. L. Mencken wrote in 1910, "that H. G. Wells has stepped into the long-vacant boots of Charles Dickens." Such comparisons with Dickens, a familiar theme in early Wells criticism, date from the publication in 1905 of *Kipps,* Wells's first fully successful attempt at a traditional novel and a book which deeply impressed Henry James, who told Wells that he had written "the first closely and intimately, the first intelligently and consistently ironic or satiric novel."

To read *Kipps* after eighty-one years is to rediscover a remarkable piece of writing, one made even more remarkable by juxtaposition with the scientific romances which preceded it. Though it lacks Dickens's moral intensity and astonishing range of characterization, *Kipps* nevertheless goes well beyond adroit pastiche, and great things were duly expected of its thirty-nine-year-old author. Henry James certainly expected them. But his opinion of Wells dropped with each succeeding novel, and by 1912 he was telling Wells that "I find myself absolutely unable, and still more unwilling, to approach you, or to take leave of you, in any projected light of criticism, in any judging or concluding, any comparing, in fact in any aesthetic or 'literary' relation at all."

What happened to Wells? The answer can be found in *Tono-Bungay,* a 1909 "condition of England" novel which satirizes capitalism and the British class system and which exemplifies the new Wells in

2 See Brad Leithauser's essay—"A Peculiarly Dark Utopian: H. G. Wells"—in the November issue of *The New Criterion.*

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every technical particular. George Ponderevo, the narrator, announces at the outset that this is to be a very personal kind of novel:

> I suppose what I'm really trying to render is nothing more nor less than Life—as one man has found it. I want to tell—*myself,* and my impressions of the thing as a whole, to say things I have come to feel intensely of the laws, traditions, uses, and ideas we call society, and how we poor individuals get driven and lured and stranded among these windy, perplexing shoals and channels . . . . I want to get in, too, all sorts of things that struck me, things that amused me and impressions I got—even although they don't minister directly to my narrative at all.

Tono-Bungay brings us face to face for the first time with Wells's promiscuous use of the first person singular as a vehicle for lengthy digressions on the state of the world and what he thought should be done about it. This approach, of course, ran afoul of Henry James's conception of the novel and its possibilities. After reading *The New Machiavelli,* in fact, James denounced the use of first-person narrative in fiction, speaking of "that accurst autobiographic form which puts a premium on the loose, the improvised, the cheap and the easy."

Obviously, Wells's conception of the novel had changed greatly since the writing of *Kipps.* He put the matter most pointedly in a 1915 letter to James: "To you literature like painting is an end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use." And he stated his position at length in a 1911 speech in which he attacked the "fierce pedantries" of the Jamesians in favor of "a laxer, more spacious form of novel-writing" in which the author may "discuss, point out, plead and display" his views of "the problems which are being raised in such bristling multitude by our contemporary social development."

Tono-Bungay is by no means a complete loss. Though undeniably shallow and caricature-ridden, it still retains much of the scope and vitality of *Kipps.* But Wells's new course as a novelist was set, and in subsequent books he would increasingly direct his artistic energies toward the further development of what he called the "discussion" novel, a genre of fiction in which, as he explained,

> the interest centres not upon individual character, but upon the struggles of common and rational motives and frank inquiry against social conditions and stereotyped ideas. The actors in them are types, therefore, rather than acutely individualised persons.

One feels that something must have gone very badly wrong indeed for the author of *Kipps* (or, for that matter, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*) to have turned to the writing of novels where, as Virginia Woolf observed, "the creator's hand, after moulding empires and sketching deities, had grown too large and slack and insensitive to shape the fine clay of men and women."

Anthony West has suggested that Wells had been deeply humiliated by the public scandal that resulted from his widely reported affair with Amber Reeves, a young Fabian who bore Wells an illegitimate child and who was the model for the heroine of *Ann Veronica.* According to West, Wells's

> recovery as a writer was only to be accomplished by a change of field—he never altogether regained the nerve to run the risk of self-exposure that is an inherent part of writing fiction, and when he made his comeback it was with *The Outline of History.* From then on he was publicist, ideas man, and propagandist first and foremost, and only incidentally the novelist.

But this explanation does not take into account the extreme solipsism that characterizes H. G. Wells's personal life as well as his later, "I"-dominated fiction. The Wells who wrote with brisk assurance of men like gods and the shape of things to come was equally determined to have his own way in matters of the heart. He married his first cousin and divorced her for a pretty young biology student. When the pretty young

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biology student proved to be less interested in sexual intercourse than Wells, he undertook a long series of affairs that left him with two bastard sons and the raw material for any number of turgid novels. (Mr. Smith manages to find in these sundry activities justification for viewing Wells as a prototypical feminist. The dispassionate observer is more likely to see Wells's women friends as the victims, not the beneficiaries, of his compulsive philandering.)

Wells remained married to his second wife, affairs notwithstanding, but his posthumous tribute to her is as revealing in its flatness of emotional affect as his account of visiting a brothel after chatting with Theodore Roosevelt:

> But she managed to sustain her belief that I was worth living for . . . while I made my way through a tangle of moods and impulses that were quite outside her instinctive sympathy. She stuck to me so sturdily that in the end I stuck to myself. I do not know what I should have been without her. She stabilized my life. She gave it a home and dignity. She preserved its continuity.

So callous an expression of materialistic sentiment toward the long-suffering Jane Wells does not bother Mr. Smith, who actually seems to admire Wells's cheek. ("What it was in a manly way is simply a farewell—*Vale,* to the dearest person he had ever known.") But there is in this passage a moral obtuseness which is the precise equivalent of the artistic philistinism that permitted Wells to squander the gifts of a potentially major novelist in the name of one "progressive" and "humanitarian" cause after another.

Like so much else, this side of Wells is beyond Mr. Smith, who claims that "no one in his own time would have thought Wells a philistine." One may profitably contrast this curious assertion with the following remark from a 1941 letter to George Bernard Shaw, a letter for which the worshipful author of *H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* could somehow find no room: "I don't care if all the treasures of art in the world are ground to powder . . . . I want to see humanity decultivated and making a fresh start. Culture is merely the ownership of stale piddle. Mantagna, Brahms, my Tang Horse, St. Paul's Cathedral, I rank a little higher than the lavender smelling correspondence of my nicer great-aunts."

"History as he sees it," George Orwell said of H. G. Wells in "Wells, Hitler and the World State," "is a series of victories won by the scientific man over the romantic man." The dichotomy Orwell proposes is a false one. Wells was, in fact, a profoundly romantic man, one whose steadfast belief in the idea of progress was accompanied by the same frank disdain for the helpless objects of his humanitarian schemes that he demonstrated in the solipsistic arrogance of his personal life.

"The difference between us, Wells, is fundamental," Joseph Conrad told him in 1918. "You don't care for humanity, but think they are to be improved. I love humanity but know they are not." Though Mr. Smith suggests that this remark is apocryphal, Wells himself said as much in public on any number of occasions:

> [T]he common uneducated man is a violent fool in social and public affairs. He can work in no way better than his quality. If there were no Fascism there would be something else of the same sort. The hope of the world lies in a broader and altogether more powerful organization of education. Only as that develops will the vehement, self-righteous and malignant ass abate his mischief in the world.

One is necessarily put in mind of the intimate connection between "Wellsian thought" and the ideology of totalitarianism, a connection which the author of *H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* misses entirely. For David C. Smith, a Wellsian world is, as the dedication of his book makes clear, an eminently desirable thing contingent solely on the efforts of "those who are willing to use their brains and their will." What he fails to understand is that the Wellsian

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world of his dreams already exists. Wells's immense popularity in Russia ought not to be ignored in this connection. Six editions of Wells's collected works have been published in the U.S.S.R. to date. The Soviet Union is in a great many respects the world H. G. Wells so ardently advocated.

Small wonder that Wells's work seems headed for a revival in the American academy, where the shield of tenure has encouraged the development of a hothouse leftism wholly divorced from the earthy realities of totalitarian repression. In so completely politicized an environment, a figure like Wells naturally exerts immense appeal: he can be taken up solely for his progressive sentiments without reference to the more subtle literary aspects of his work. Mr. Smith's greatest failure as a biographer lies in his inability to transcend this narrowly political parochialism. For a historian to have spent so long studying H. G. Wells's life and work without having achieved any understanding of the relationship in which "Wellsian thought" stands to the horrors of totalitarianism is bad enough. For him then to have produced a six-hundred-page biography which deals so unintelligently with Wells's fiction, the principal claim he now has on our attention, is altogether inexcusable.

The other brothers

Jane Maher Biography of Broken Fortunes: Wilkie and Bob, Brothers of William, Henry, and Alice James. Archon Books, 202 pages, $22.50

reviewed by Donna Rifkind

In 1863, at the age of seventeen, Robertson James and the rest of the Fifty-fifth Massachusetts Regiment of the Union Army were involved in a secret mission to construct an island made from sandbags off Charleston Harbor, on which they planned to mount a gun. The project took months, under the worst conditions possible; at no time were the soldiers given relief from heat, disease, hunger, vermin, dysentery, or exhaustion. Robertson later described the construction of the gun, which was nicknamed the "Swamp Angel," as "a monotonous, joyless pursuit." Once mounted, the gun collapsed after the first few discharges.

This incident is characteristic of the histories of Robertson James and his older brother, Garth Wilkinson James, both of whom, in their inexpert stumbling through unlucky lives, might at times appear more like Marx brothers than James brothers, were it not for the fact that their misfortunes were too great to be funny. They are the subjects of a new book, *Biography of Broken Fortunes,* by Jane Maher, an English professor at Fairfield University in Connecticut. Maher claims that these brothers of William, Henry, and Alice James "have been relegated to the background of the James family biographies, where they appear only as failed, shadowy figures whose troubled lives sometimes disturbed the lives of their siblings. It wasn't like that at all." The author's purpose is to explain more accurately how the two brothers fit into the complicated James family structure.

The only previous "biography" of Robertson and Garth Wilkinson (known as Bob and Wilkie) was commissioned and paid for by Bob's daughter, Mary James Vaux, and written by a biographer named Anna Robeson Burr in 1934. Actually the book was a long essay about the three younger children in the James family, to which Alice's diary was appended. Entitled *Alice James: Her Brothers—Her Journal,* the book was commercially successful, but Maher writes that "its success reflects the interest Americans had in the James family more than the quality of the book itself"; she calls it "simplistic" and "of little use," and mentions the James biographies which have since come to be considered the most valuable: R. B. Perry's and Gay Wilson Allen's books on William, Leon Edel's five-volume life of Henry, and Jean Strouse's biography of Alice. One might also add Austin Warren's excellent 1934 book, *The Elder Henry James.*

No doubt a biography of two forgotten

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brothers from one of America's most interesting families is welcome; and, as Maher rather obviously points out, "knowing more about [Wilkie and Bob] leads to a better understanding of William and Henry." Throughout their lives, and especially as children, all five siblings had close emotional ties; Henry in his *Autobiography* called them "such a company of characters . . . withal so fused and united and interlocked, that each . . . pleads for preservation." Although biographers have tended to pair William and Henry together, and then Wilkie and Bob, leaving Alice to struggle along by herself, Maher reminds us that in fact Henry and Wilkie (who was two years his junior) were often together as children, and Bob and Alice were left alone in the nursery, where they frequently pretended to be their parents, calling each other "Henry" and "Mary." Only later, Maher shows, were the teenaged Bob and Wilkie encouraged to provide companionship for each other at the abolitionist-run, coeducational Sanborn School in Concord. Their lives continued to run parallel in the army during the Civil War, in the management of a cotton plantation in Florida after the war, and finally as railroad clerks in Milwaukee.

Maher's thesis about the much-debated question of why the Jameses encouraged Wilkie and Bob to enlist in the army while William and Henry were allowed to remain at home is plausible, although not enough evidence exists to verify it. She writes that the parents, having concluded at some point that William and Henry had the most intellectual promise of the four boys, seem to have decided that the two younger sons ought to remain together, in similar occupations, more for mutual support than because both were necessarily suited to the same jobs. This arrangement left the parents free to concentrate on William's and Henry's career choices, and later on Alice's lifelong series of attention-demanding illnesses. Furthermore, Wilkie and Bob were restless at the Sanborn School, and Maher suggests sensibly that they simply wanted to enlist, while William and Henry did not.

Whatever the reasons for the circumstances, the facts remain: Wilkie and Bob at every step were placed in less attractive situations, with little choice, while William and Henry were financially and emotionally supported in occupations which they themselves chose. All four boys—and Alice too, in her strange way—lived up to their father's exhortation to be above all else extraordinary. As Jean Strouse has noted, "in the eyes of this novel parent, an interesting failure seemed far more worthy of appreciation than any 'too obvious success.'" When they were successful, as William and Henry of course were, they were unmatched; when they lost, as Wilkie and Bob tended to do, they lost in big ways. Illnesses, personal and professional defeats, depressions—all were experienced on a scale commensurate with their bold-minded father's expectations.

For Wilkie and Bob, the Civil War was to provide the only opportunity to display their intelligence and courage in a satisfactory way. They were both very young when they enlisted (Bob had not even quite reached the required age of eighteen), and both joined regiments consisting mainly of black recruits. The Union Army at the time was badly in need of men, and the black enlistment was considered something of an experiment which aroused a good deal of skepticism. "Northern soldiers," Maher notes, "were willing to fight for blacks but not with them." Wilkie, Bob, and sons of other prominent abolitionist Boston families were thus showing idealism in addition to courage by becoming officers in these regiments, not least because of the special fury the sight of the black troops incited in Confederate soldiers.

The physical and emotional demands of the army were clearly difficult for the two rather spoiled boys, who had spent a large part of their childhoods in Europe receiving what their father called a "sensuous education." Wilkie, the pluckier and more good-natured of the two, seems to have endured the rigors of army life better than the moody, homesick Bob, despite the fact that Wilkie very nearly died after being wounded

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in the foot and the side near the spine in July of 1863. The letters from family members to the boys show them all to have been proud and supportive, with Henry Sr. constantly advising Bob to remain with his company when Bob wanted to leave. Both boys later turned down opportunities for early honorable discharges, and each was promoted to captain for "valiant service." William and Henry, though their praise was often accompanied by teasing, seemed sincerely to admire their brothers' wartime achievements. "He is the best abolitionist you ever saw," wrote William to a cousin about Wilkie, "and makes a common one, as we are, feel very small and shabby."

The war, for whatever it did to help the boys' self-esteem, was nevertheless far from a joyful experience, and Henry wrote years later in his *Autobiography* that Wilkie "was touchingly young to have such big things, and difficult and trying things, happen to him, and I see how he bore the mark of them for good and for harm . . . ever afterwards." Maher mentions that it was during the war years that Bob's lifelong alcoholism began (a letter Alice wrote much later indicates it), and he eventually came bitterly to resent that he had carried the burden of being a soldier at such a young age, without ever having had the chance to develop his own interests and talents. He was always, for example, interested in painting, but while William and Henry were sent to study art with William Morris Hunt in Newport, Bob was never offered a similar opportunity.

The family moved from Newport to Boston in 1864, during the end of the war. Bob returned from the army in July of 1865, with Wilkie following in August. The economy at the time was poor, and neither young man was particularly equipped with employable skills. (Maher writes that Bob could speak fluent French and could lead men into battle—hardly practical vocational assets.) A family friend offered to invest in land in Florida, to be managed by Wilkie, using former slaves to raise cotton. After a brief, fruitless period in Iowa, Bob joined Wilkie on the plantation, which was located about ten miles north of Gainesville. While many biographers have implied that this venture was an isolated experiment, financed chiefly by Henry Sr. with the sole intention of helping newly freed blacks, Maher asserts that in fact many northerners were purchasing land in the South at this time with the hope of making large profits from cotton growing. She also points out, however, that only five percent of the northerners who went south for this purpose had ever been farmers, and that they were all thoroughly resented by the southerners whose land they were now attempting to profit from.

The odds against the two boys in this venture were formidable, and each displayed characteristic behavior in the face of almost certain failure: Wilkie was spunky, overly optimistic about profits, and eager to prove himself. Bob, whose request to study architecture in Boston had recently been denied by his parents, was gloomy and soon began to have apparently psychosomatic asthmatic symptoms. Again Maher asserts her theory that Bob's request was denied because his parents were determined to have him serve as a companion to Wilkie. There is little source material to prove this, and none of Bob's letters from the period have survived. But it does seem clear that Bob missed the East and the literary and artistic stimulation he could receive there, although he was unable to remain long at his parents' home without feeling restless and irritable. So he remained in Florida, his only other choice.

The enterprise proved after a short time to be a disaster. Crops were poor, the neighboring southerners were increasingly hostile, and their third partner turned out to be a cheat. At one point Wilkie wrote to his father of falling with a fellow worker into a swamp, in "two feet of the blackest mud I ever saw, and as I acted in the capacity of flooring for Kent who fell on top of me, of course no particle of my face nor clothing was without a smear of mud." This incident rivals Bob's "Swamp Angel" experience for its absurdly comic despair, except that scenes like it were to continue so unre-

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lievedly throughout both of the brothers' lives that one would be cold-hearted indeed to laugh at it. Wilkie refused to give up the plantation even when it was clear that it was doomed. Returning home a failure, Maher writes, was unthinkable to him. He even persuaded his father to buy more land twenty miles north of the first site at a time when there was no doubt that Henry Sr. would lose a great deal of his original investment. Wilkie had, according to Maher, "an incomprehensible and illogical coupling of a Calvinist approval of material success with his father's belief that one's moral worth was far more important than his financial worth." He also, as it later became more clear, had an inability to admit that he had made a mistake.

Wilkie remained in Florida until early 1871, then joined Bob, who had found employment in Milwaukee as a clerk for the St. Paul Railway. Bob secured Wilkie a similar position, and both became engaged to daughters of successful Milwaukee businessmen. Bob married Mary Holton in November of 1872; Wilkie was forced to wait until November of 1873 to marry Caroline Carry, as his salary was too low for him to afford marriage before that time. Henry Sr. wrote to Henry after meeting Bob's wife, "We are all immeasurably—not satisfied, but encouraged, hopeful, delighted." The family was far less delighted with Wilkie's wife, whom they considered too cold and proud to be "fit to be the wife of a poor man." For by that time it had become clear to everyone that Wilkie would never be anything but a poor man. He was foolishly optimistic about the various business ventures he became involved in; he was careless with money and therefore increasingly in debt. Henry wrote to William at one point that "Poor Wilkie gives a sorry account of his present business and says he means to leave it and look for a clerkship . . . . He seems to have a rude career."

The desire to leave their situations with the hope of finding some brighter, better life became a constant theme throughout both Bob's and Wilkie's adult lives. Bob at various times tried to improve his circumstances by leaving suddenly for Colorado, England, Canada, and Concord; he left his wife and returned to her repeatedly; he retreated into alcoholic stupors; he was drawn to the parentlike guidance of Christian Science, Catholicism, spiritualism, and his father's Swedenborgianism. In a letter to William's wife Alice in 1898, he wrote, "I think when I get thoroughly restored here [in Dansville Asylum] and everything is permanently disposed of as to my future . . . I may end my life in Europe somewhere." Wilkie became involved in increasingly unwise business decisions in order to extract his family from a deepening debt, a predicament made all the more bitter when his father excluded him from his will. At this time Wilkie wrote to Bob, who had had seven thousand dollars deducted from his own share of the estate to clear an outstanding debt to his father, hoping that Bob would help him contest the terms of the will:

> It was a base cowardly act of father's, a death stab at two of his children to whom he owed every gratitude . . . . a death stab at the only two of his children who dared fight through the war for the defense of the family and the only two who attempted while very young to earn their own living and have earned it steadily ever since.

Although Wilkie hints—and strong evidence indicates he is correct—that the boys' Aunt Kate Walsh probably persuaded Henry Sr. to exclude Wilkie from the will, and although Henry Jr. as executor felt the situation was unjust and had the inheritance redivided to include Wilkie, neither brother ever recovered from the feeling that they had since childhood been neglected, excluded, wronged. Bob, in an attempt to write an autobiography late in life, wrote: ". . . I developed such an ability for feeling hurt and wounded that I became quite convinced by the time I was twelve years old that I was a foundling." While Bob no doubt felt this sense of not belonging acutely, one could not blame his older brothers for contrib-

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uting to it. Both William and Henry constantly showed close concern for Bob and Wilkie, and praised them as much as possible. "There were times," Henry wrote with characteristic kindness in his *Autobiography,* "when Bob's spoken overflow struck me as the equivalent, for fine animation, of William's epistolary."

In truth, all five James children exhibited, at one time or another, a capacity for almost morbidly sensitive feelings of hurt and a competing need for attention; their psychosomatic complaints were one indication of this, and indeed, as Jean Strouse has shown, Alice with her constant nervous illnesses made a career of it. But there is something especially touching in Wilkie's and Bob's feelings in the light of their failures and missed opportunities. It is sad to read Bob's letter to his wife after his mother's death, which reads: "We have all been educated by father to feel that death was the only reality and that life was simply an experimental thing . . . ." Ironically, Bob's time spent with his father in the melancholy days after Mrs. James's death is "the happiest I have known" since his engagement: "I sleep beside him in mother's empty bed and we have quite happy talks at night . . . ." For this youngest son, whose fantasy was to return to a peaceful childhood, the responsibilities of his "experimental" adult life were far less attractive than the childish pleasure of commanding his father's full attention, even in a sorrowful time.

Moving as Wilkie's and Bob's desire for a share of the family's attention is, it is equally moving to witness their constant—and vain—search for guidelines by which to live. Their father, as Austin Warren has shown, had a "suspicion of all consistency, of all system, of all which hardens the individual into the type . . . . [his sons] were to cultivate nothing less ample than the universally human." Yet this insistence on his sons' freedom was itself a kind of tyranny, for it was consistency and system that Bob and Wilkie most craved: a profession, a religion, a way to conduct their lives, because without such a system they lacked the strength to fashion identities with which they could responsibly operate. William and Henry each had the formidable talent, and the parental encouragement, to construct elaborate and very individual systems, William through the study of psychology and Henry through literature. Both older brothers in effect created for themselves an art of feeling, and in doing so Henry mounted at the same time a fantastically rich festival of art, and William helped begin a new science. Alice dedicated her life to this art of feeling, making, through her diary, a deliberately literary attempt to systematize her pains, her joys, her own observations about behavior.

Wilkie and Bob had no such system, although they did have much of the same psychological equipment, the strengths and weaknesses, which their siblings used in the constructions of their own. Both died after long illnesses—Wilkie of Bright's disease at age thirty-eight, and Bob after five years in a sanitarium, alone, of a heart attack, at age sixty-three. Each of their deaths brought relief for the three other Jameses along with a pointed sadness. Henry wrote to a friend after Wilkie died, "All the last news of him is a record of unmitigated suffering, and he was long ready to go . . . . Peace be to his spirit—one of the gentlest and kindest I have ever known." In Bob's unfinished autobiography he had written, "I see yet the fortunate scholars ascend the steps of [a mayor's] throne, kneel at his feet, and receive crown or rosettes, or some symbol of merit which *we* did not get. The luck had begun to break early!" A biography of a life such as his, Bob felt, "would have to be the biography of broken fortunes."

Maher's biography spins itself out in a straightforward, matter-of-fact way—no easy accomplishment, one feels sure, for the temptation to dwell upon the pathos of these lives must have been great. She cannot rely on a large amount of primary source material, since many letters from crucial periods of the brothers' lives have been destroyed, but for the most part she lets what material there is speak for itself, and

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forms a coherent narrative from it. She seems to have an aversion to any use of psychoanalytical theory, which is not surprising given the way biographers have indulged themselves in the past in exploring such a psychologically complex family. Nevertheless, one would have liked to see Maher venture a bit more into this unsafe territory; she mentions, for example, that discoveries like Erikson's theory of personality development contribute to a "far greater understanding of Bob's struggles with himself and others," but gives readers only the barest outline of that theory as it applies to Bob.

In any case, Maher's book is a good resource, and her tone, though unemotional, is not unsympathetic toward her subjects. She goes to some length to correct biographers' details where she can, giving evidence, for instance, that Wilkie's debt upon his death came to $20,000 and not $80,000, which was the previous consensus. But one does not have the sense throughout the book that the author is being sensible at the expense of sympathy; she shows the members of this extraordinary family suffering for and with each other, and ends on a decent, if self-evident, note: ". . . but among the four men there was never a sense that William and Henry, because they achieved prominence, were superior to Wilkie and Bob. Throughout their lives, they loved and cared for each other as equals, as brothers."

Academic selves

Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, David E. Wellbery, et alia, editors
Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought. Stanford University Press, 365 pages, $39.50

reviewed by Roger Kimball

The Glass Bead Game is a mode of playing with the total contents and values of our culture; it plays with them as, say, in the great age of the arts a painter might have played with the colors on his palette. All the insights, noble thoughts, and works of art that the human race has produced in its creative eras, all that subsequent periods of scholarly study have reduced to concepts and converted into intellectual property—on all this immense body of intellectual values the Glass Bead Game player plays like the organist on an organ.

—Herman Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game*

The sixteen essays collected in *Reconstructing Individualism* are drawn from a host of papers presented at a three-day conference by the same title held at Stanford University in February, 1984. Including contributions by such formidable scholars as the art historian Michael Fried, the philosophers Stanley Cavell and Martha C. Nussbaum, the sociologist Niklas Luhmann, the historian Natalie Zemon Davis, the literary critics John Freccero and Stephen Greenblatt, and others of similar academic repute, the volume may be taken as a "state of the art" report on current academic thinking about the notion of individualism. And because the notion of individualism has traditionally occupied a central place in the humanities, we may also look to *Reconstructing Individualism* for some insight into the situation of the humanities in the more advanced precincts of contemporary academic life.

The essays themselves vary considerably in quality and tone. One or two are more or less traditional academic exercises: sober investigations that are at pains to be responsible to the reader and to the subject under discussion. J. B. Schneewind's essay, "The Use of Autonomy in Ethical Theory," for example, reviews the concept of autonomy in the moral philosophies of Bishop Butler, Kant, and John Rawls and ends up by defending a theologically "neutral" version of an "autonomy-centered morality" against several common objections. The essay is technical enough to be of interest mostly to persons with philosophical training, but it has the decided virtue—a virtue rarely evident in *Reconstructing Individualism*—of dealing straightforwardly and thoughtfully with its topic.

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Less straightforward, but equally thoughtful, are Martha C. Nussbaum's meditations on "Love and the Individual: Romantic Rightness and Platonic Aspiration." Employing the old conceit of the found papers of mysterious origin ("There in this closet, on the floor, I noticed a strange document: a manuscript of some 38 pages . . . . I could not figure out who its author was"), Professor Nussbaum accurately describes her contribution as a "story," "a strange hybrid of fiction and philosophy." The result is in fact a bit precious: "She sat there, somewhat absurdly weeping into the book, and the phrase 'special perfectness' conjured up an image so concrete that she shuddered at its nearness and wept again. (I find it difficult to describe this.)" The reader may find it difficult to read it, and the "story" abounds in this sort of thing. But it also offers its share of insights, both into Plato's discussion of love in the *Phaedrus* and more generally into the subject of "love and the individual." And unlike virtually every other piece in the book, Professor Nussbaum's meditation exhibits a refreshingly direct engagement with its subject: whatever its flaws, one does not come away feeling that for her "individualism" is merely an academic curiosity, divorced from any vital concern.

Of course, it has become practically axiomatic in the academy that one cannot invoke so jaded a notion as "individualism" without an elaborate garland of reservations, qualifications, and caveats. Any discussion of the subject has to be undertaken with the clear understanding that one is dealing with tainted goods. For one thing, because individualism is widely recognized as one of the bedrocks of Western liberal thought, no self-respecting academic would dream of taking it "straight," of dealing with it on its own terms as an idea that continues to have a profound claim on us morally and intellectually. "Individualism" in this sense is only slightly less disreputable in the academy these days than that ultimate term of abuse, "bourgeois."

Hence, it is not surprising that, as Messrs. Heller and Wellbery put it in their introduction, the "animating assumption" of the conference was that "the concept of the individual, which has played such a central role in the formation of the post-Renaissance world, needs to be rethought in the wake of the severe criticisms which have been directed against it" over the course of the last century. "[D]evelopments in the material and social realms," we read, "such as industrialization and the emergence of mass society" have rendered individualism "problematic," have even "altered the ontological foundations of individual identity." By now, having been subjected to the "deconstructive" scrutiny of such critics as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—to say nothing of the legions of academics who carry on in their name today—individualism can be made academically palatable only if it is suitably "reconstructed." While the particulars of this envisioned "reconstruction" are never really set forth, it is nonetheless clear that most of these essays are to be seen primarily as attempts to explore alternative, "reconstructed" versions of individualism—"post-cultural" versions, perhaps (to employ a word brandished by one of the essays): versions of individualism sophisticated enough to dispense with anything so embarrassing as particular individuals. "At the volume's close," the introduction cheerfully concludes, "the figure of the individual has not been discredited or dissolved so much as displaced and transposed."

Even so, it must be said that most of the efforts at "displacement" and "transposition" collected here do what they can to discredit the "figure of the individual." In "Toward a Relational Individualism: The Mediation of the Self Through Psychoanalysis," for example, Nancy Julia Chodorow assures us that "Psychoanalysis radically undermines notions about autonomy, individual choice, will, responsibility, and rationality, showing that we do not control our own lives in the most fundamental sense." But think about it: to what extent has psychoanalysis really *undermined* our notions of will, choice, responsibility, etc.? Did not Professor Chodorow *will* to write this essay?

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Did she not *choose* to contribute to this volume? Did she not assume the *responsibility* of submitting a manuscript by a certain date, and so on? "Rationality" I'll leave to one side—I have to admit that some of the contributions to this volume have shaken my confidence there—but notwithstanding academic psychoanalysis's voluminous attempts to convince us that we are creatures of unconscious impulses, do we not in fact bear witness to the cogency and pertinence of such concepts as will, choice, and responsibility every day?

Among the chief casualties of this brand of criticism are its heroes. Nietzsche has suffered particular indignities at its hands. Typical is Werner Hamacher's long and elliptical essay on "'Disgregation of the Will': Nietzsche on the Individual and Individuality." He manages to grind all the philosopher's trenchant comments on the subject into a kind of murky verbal paste. "The term 'individuality,'" Professor Hamacher tells us, "properly applies only to what transgresses the series of forms and the form of forms (typological knowledge and its objective correlatives), dissociating itself from the rigor mortis of canonical life forms, eluding the subsumptive compulsion of general categories, advancing toward a future that withdraws from every typology and objectification." This is Nietzsche, champion of Dionysus, philosopher of the Anti-Christ? "I shall repeat a hundred times," Nietzsche wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil,* "we really ought to free ourselves from the seduction of words!" Obviously, there are some things you can't say too often.

To speak of "seduction by words" brings us to one of the main features—one might even say "principles"—of the chic academic criticism that *Reconstructing Individualism* specializes in: the attempt to enliven its cruelly abstract, anemic prose by interleaving it with sex, preferably perverse sex, the more violent the better. To employ one of its favorite terms, we might even say that such criticism "fetishizes" the erotic. The chief locus of sexual relations is not, of course, between individuals but within language itself. That's where the real excitement is. This makes for some pretty silly speculations, but it does allow one to throw around lots of terms like "phallocratic," "castration," and so on. *Reconstructing Individualism* is full of this sort of thing. Stephen Greenblatt, for example, bases his entire article on "Fiction and Friction" on the story of a seventeenth-century French hermaphrodite, the insistence that sexual difference is "unstable and artificial," and a theory about the relation between individualism, "sexual chafing," and "the wantonness of language."

Indeed, recourse to smarmy eroticism seems to have become practically a ritual gesture, a verbal tic. One first says something about language—about how everything is really only a corollary of language, etc.—and then one introduces a sexual twist. Paolo Valesio offers a good example in his essay, "The Beautiful Lie: Heroic Individuality and Fascism," (the "lie" being individualism, of course). Having told us that individualism is "a poetic concern, a concern with linguistic intensification and shaping," he proceeds to note that here, "[a]s in every intensification of reading, not only the link with the process of writing emerges, . . . but the link of both processes with solitary and self-sufficient love—with the softly existential grounding of solipsism, masturbation." Or take Christine Brooke-Rose's essay on "The Dissolution of Character in the Novel." In the midst of the usual litany about the death of character—"character," like "individualism," turns out to be in need of "reconstruction"—we read that "characters are verbal structures; they are like our real-life relationships but have no semblance of a referent. More and more swollen with words, like stray phalluses they wander our minds, cut off from the body of the text . . ." Those phalluses! They crop up everywhere these days.

The treatment of sex in such works as *Reconstructing Individualism* highlights one of the great ironies of the whole enterprise: going on and on about the importance of reading more carefully, more critically,

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more boldly, it proceeds to display a remarkable obtuseness about the works it addresses. Concentrating on some detail of a text, it misses the whole; seizing upon verbal similarities, it misses the sense. Often, one gathers, this is just the point. In the present volume, Stanley Cavell's essay on "Being Odd, Getting Even: Threats to Individuality" offers a sterling example of the procedure.

Continuing his recent efforts to champion Emerson's philosophical acumen and to blur the distinction between philosophy and literature, Professor Cavell begins by suggesting that in "Self-Reliance," when Emerson writes that "Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage," he is actually quoting Descartes's famous slogan *Cogito, ergo sum*. More, he insists that Emerson was up to essentially the same sort of thing that Descartes was up to in the *Meditations*. "[O]ne can describe Emerson's progress as his having posed Descartes's question for himself and provided a fresh line of answer, one you might call a grammatical answer: I am a being who to exist must say I exist, or must acknowledge my existence—claim it, stake it, enact it." He goes on to compare the studied, deliberately ratiocinative style of Poe's story "Imp of the Perverse" to Descartes's prose style, and ends by suggesting that Hollywood melodrama "may be seen as an interpretation of Descartes's cogito."

Professor Cavell's presentation is canny, entertaining, and perfectly unbelievable. We may pass over the details of his analysis. But—speaking of "Imp of the Perverse"—it is worth remarking how perverse his essay is. Consider only his treatment of Emerson. "'Self-Reliance' as a whole," he tells us, "presents a theory . . . of reading." In fact, what Emerson presents, there as elsewhere, are not really "theories" at all but elegantly cast, edifying opinions. Whatever virtues Emerson possessed—and he possessed many—his was not a philosophical mind; he did not argue, he declaimed, he preached. What he wrote was not philosophy but a species of hortatory essay. And to pretend that "Self-Reliance"—that rousing, unsystematic sermon on the virtues of independent thinking—has any intrinsic connection to a seventeenth-century philosophical tract concerned with basic epistemological and theological questions is simply ridiculous.

Nevertheless, Professor Cavell's remarks at least have the virtue of being written in something resembling English. This cannot be said of all the contributions to *Reconstructing Individualism*. Many trail off into a vertiginous hinterland of the mind where the words spin themselves out in hopelessly jargon-laden skeins. One could open the book pretty much at random, but Niklas Luhmann's reflections on "The Individuality of the Individual" contain some choice examples. "We may, of course, define emotions as the autopoietic immune system of the autopoietic psychic system; but again: is this emotionally adequate?" Anyone wish to answer that? "The most important consequence," Professor Luhmann continues a bit later, "might well be that the theory of autopoietic systems seems to bar all ways back to an anthropological conception of man. It precludes, in other words, humanism [yet another term, incidentally, that has been singled out for academic "reconstruction"] . . . . This means that we have to invent new conceptual artificialities in order to give an account of what we see when we meet somebody who looks and behaves like a human being. How do we know that he is one?" Hard to say, hard to say.

Practically all of these faults—deliberately perverse interpretations, verbal obscurity, etc.—are writ large in Michael Fried's contribution to *Reconstructing Individualism*: "Courbet's Metaphysics: A Reading of 'The Quarry.'" It is indeed a kind of specimen text, and is worth lingering over in some detail. Professor Fried began his career with a handful of brilliantly eccentric essays on modernist art and Minimalism. His essay "Art and Objecthood," which first appeared in *Artforum* in 1967, is something of a classic of the genre. But he has become increasingly smitten with the motions of his private

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hermeneutical game, preferring his own interpretative categories to the evidence of his eyes and common sense. By the time he published his book *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980), the relation between the paintings and criticism Professor Fried discussed and the interpretations he proposed was already often tenuous. In the present essay, the relation has all but snapped.

His announced subject is Gustave Courbet's 1856 painting, *The Quarry,* a hunting scene that depicts a moment of rest after a successful hunt. In the left foreground, the vanquished roe deer hangs from a branch, its head lolling sideways on the ground. To the right, receding into a shadow, the hunter—generally acknowledged to be a self-portrait—leans back dreamily against a tree. Further to the right, the *piqueur,* the master of the hounds, sits in a brilliant slip of light blowing a hunting horn. In the right foreground two dogs, also brightly illuminated, frisk playfully. It is well to supply this simple description at the outset, for as Professor Fried progresses with his interpretation one's grasp of the particulars of Courbet's painting is likely to become shaky.

Among much else, Professor Fried's interpretation indulges heavily in a second major principle—not to say cliché—of fashionable academic criticism, the principle that holds that whatever the work (poem, painting, novel, essay) is ostensibly about, at bottom it is self-referential, being primarily a figure for the creative activity of painting or writing. The overt subject of the work may initially mislead one into supposing that it is really about something else, something quite tangible in one's physical or emotional experience—a hunting scene, for example. But an adroit practitioner of the new academic criticism easily overcomes such "extrinsic" objections. One powerful—if by now well-worn—aid in this task is the word "symbol" and its fashionable variants: "metaphor," "metonymy," "synecdoche," "trope," etc. Like the philosopher's stone, these terms can transform the base material of reality into the gold of "intertextuality." Professor Fried provides us with many wonderful examples of the procedure. We do not have to read far into his essay before we are told that the *piqueur* is really

> another of Courbet's characteristically displaced and metaphorical representations of the activity, the mental and physical *effort,* of painting. Thus the young man's strange, half-seated pose (with nothing beneath him but his folded jacket) may be taken as evoking the actual posture of the painter-beholder seated before the canvas. The hunting horn, held in his left hand, combines aspects of a paintbrush (I'm thinking of the horn's narrow, tubular neck) and a palette (its rounded shape) though strictly resembling neither, and of course a horn being blown is also a traditional image of the fame Courbet forever aspired to win by his art.

It's not long, in fact, before Professor Fried can conclude that "all three principals—hunter, roe deer, and *piqueur*—are in different respects figurations of the painter-beholder [Courbet himself]." One only wonders what he has against dogs: why aren't they, too, "figurations of the painter-beholder"? Isn't their playfulness there in the painting's foreground a symbol of the playful dialogue of the creative mind at work—doubled to represent the simultaneous interplay of the productive and critical faculties, tokens of the artist's awareness of his intractable animality . . . but you see how it works. It's like something out of *The Pooh Perplex,* minus the light touch.

Operating on the principle that if something isn't shown, it is more present than if it is, Professor Fried has no trouble populating the canvas with all manner of objects and covert significances. There is no gun depicted in the painting? No problem: "in place of the missing musket there is the *piqueur*'s hunting horn, previously described as symbolizing the painter's tools (and therefore linking those tools with the absent weapon); . . ." *Therefore?* Yes, of course. But what about sex? We have seen that no such interpretation can be complete without a dash of the erotic, preferably outlandish, but

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where in this forest scene could one conjure sex? A tired hunter, a self-absorbed *piqueur,* two dogs, and a dead deer may not seem much to work with. Not to worry: "I for one," Professor Fried confides, "am struck by the implied violence of the exposure to the hunter's viewpoint of the dead roe deer's underside, specifically including its genitals."

One has to admire Professor Fried's brass. And his well-developed sense of just how far he can intrude upon the reader's credulity without making any concessions to common sense. "The last observation may seem excessive," he allows.

> For one thing, I am attaching considerable significance to a "side" of the roe deer we cannot see as well as to a bodily organ that isn't actually depicted. For another, the hunter isn't looking at the roe deer but faces in a different direction. But I would counter that we are led to imagine the roe deer's genitals or at any rate to be aware of their existence by the exposure to our view of the roe deer's anus, a metonymy for the rest . . . . I would further suggest that, precisely because the roe deer's anus stands for so much we cannot see—not simply the roe deer's genitals and wounded underside but an entire virtual face of the painting—such an effect of equivalence or translatability may be taken as indicating that the first, imaginary point of view is more important, and in the end more "real," than the second.

The imaginary point of view is more important and in the end more real than the point of view discerned with one's eyes: this sums up the method. But wait, there is more. In a long footnote to this passage, Professor Fried tells us that

> my suggestion that *The Quarry* calls attention to the roe deer's undepicted genitals and to their exposure to the hunter or at least to his point of view invites further discussion in terms of the Freudian problematic of castration. Now what chiefly characterizes the painting's treatment of these motifs (if I may so describe them) is the absence of any signs of special or excessive affect and in particular of anxiety, which may seem to indicate that for the painter-beholder the implied threat to the roe deer's genitals was simply that, an objective menace, not the expression of a primal insecurity. On the other hand, the absence of affect ought perhaps to be seen as a further expression of the splitting of the painter-beholder into passive hunter and active *piqueur*: that is, it would be a further index of the hunter-painter's manifest passivity, which itself might be described as a sort of castration.

Consider: the roe deer's genitals are undepicted, therefore the painting "invites" discussion in terms of the Freudian notion of castration; the hunter isn't looking at the deer: no matter, the deer's genitals are exposed "at least to his point of view" (i.e., if he only turned his head, he would see them); despite this threat of castration, the hunter displays no special signs of affect or emotion, quite the opposite: no matter, being passive may itself be described as "a sort of castration" (on which account I suppose that a painting of a man asleep or unconscious or dead would provide an even more dramatic "index" of preoccupation with castration). Poor Courbet!

But even to raise objections risks complicity with Professor Fried's undertaking, granting it a measure of credibility it can never have. For the suggestion that *The Quarry* has anything to do with castration—indeed, that it has much of anything to do with sexual violence, period—is ludicrous. If any of the theories of Sigmund Freud have a bearing on the matter at all, it is not his conjectures about castration anxiety or "displacement" but his method of free association: here at any rate we may have a clue to Professor Fried's own critical method.

Professor Fried's speculations about the hidden sexual current in Courbet's painting are perhaps the most outrageously absurd aspects of his interpretation of *The Quarry.* But in many ways even more absurd—because it touches directly on the core of Courbet's painting—is the end to which Professor Fried's complex hermeneutical apparatus tends. This is summed up in his

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title: "Courbet's Metaphysics"—probably the drollest piece of unintentional wit in the whole of *Reconstructing Individualism.* Drawing in part upon an obscure work by the obscure nineteenth-century French philosopher Felix Ravaisson, Professor Fried concludes that "the project of Courbet's Realism—of his metaphysics—was above all to represent" the "indemonstrable ideality" of nature. "Indemonstrable," of course; and note Professor Fried's sly apposition of "realism" and "metaphysics," as if these opposing terms really meant more or less the same thing.

Now the truth is that, in the repertoire of Courbet's beliefs as we know them, there is nothing that can even remotely be described as a "metaphysics." Indeed, few painters can have been more overtly *anti*-metaphysical than Gustave Courbet. In part, that is what the usual description of him as a "Realist" intends. Courbet himself put the matter with admirable clarity in 1861 in a letter to his students. The emphasis is his.

> I also believe that painting is an essentially CONCRETE art and can only consist of the representation of REAL AND EXISTING objects. It is a completely physical language that has as words all visible objects, and an ABSTRACT object, invisible and nonexistent, is not part of painting's domain.

Like many of the essays in this volume, Professor Fried's interpretation of Courbet's painting brings considerable erudition and an even more considerable ingenuity to bear upon his subject. We read about Courbet's method of composing a painting by joining separate strips of canvas, are privy to considerations of the evidence of pentimento, and witness the rehearsal of a stunning array of scholarship. But to what end? As in Hesse's *Glass Bead Game,* the matter at hand is merely the occasion, the raw material, for an elaborate interpretative exercise. What we see throughout these essays is an extraordinary amount of analytical bravura engaged in what is at bottom a narcissistic game. Whether the occasion is Nietzsche, or Courbet, or psychoanalysis, or an obscure account of hermaphroditism in seventeenth-century France, "individualism" is only the theme upon which the players execute their hermeneutical arabesques—not to illuminate the idea but to embellish the pages of their critical text. "The whole secret," as Kierkegaard put it in *Either/Or,* "lies in arbitrariness . . . . [Y]ou consider the whole of existence from this standpoint; let its reality be stranded thereon." And the fact that the notion of individualism is assumed to be bankrupt only makes the game more challenging. The task then becomes finding a way of "reconstructing" individualism without precisely reinstating or legitimating it; and in this task, at least, it must be said that most of the essayists in this volume excel.

What Michael Fried has in common with Stanley Cavell, Stephen Greenblatt, Werner Hamacher, and most of the other contributors is the almost casual cynicism characteristic of an age that, as Kierkegaard put it elsewhere, *"leaves everything standing but cunningly empties it of significance."* In itself, of course, the performance of the writers collected in *Reconstructing Individualism* is nothing out of the ordinary. The players are more skilled than many, but in essence it is simply business as usual in the academy these days. What is particularly dispiriting is the thought that many of these men and women are among the brightest, most talented scholars in their fields. That they should have chosen to abandon anything like a traditional humanistic approach to their subjects, that they should have given themselves up so shamelessly to the latest intellectual fashions, is a troubling sign indeed for the humanities. Even more troubling is the fact that *Reconstructing Individualism* represents the sort of thing that is being passed off as humanistic inquiry by teachers at our best colleges and universities. As a contribution to thinking about the subject it purports to address, *Reconstructing Individualism* is hardly worth the paper it is printed on. But as a record of contemporary academic decline, it stands as an eloquent if melancholy admonition.

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Letters

Harry Houdini

To the Editors:

As an amateur magician of long standing, I was naturally interested in Daniel Mark Epstein's "The Case of Houdini" (October, 1986). His attempt to refute a showman who insisted that magicians always use natural means will convince no magicians because Mr. Epstein's arguments ignore the best scholarship on magic.

It is true that Houdini left no explanation of his escape from the Siberian Transport Cell, but Milbourne Christopher, a distinguished magician and scholar of magic, has pointed out that "it is likely that he stretched his arm through the barred window until he could reach the lock and opened it with a pick." (*Houdini: The Untold Story*, p. 74.) It is not true that "no one has the slightest notion" how Houdini did his Chinese Water Torture Cell illusion. Mr. Epstein seeks to make something out of the fact that Hardeen, who inherited the equipment from his brother, never got in it. But as Christopher points out: "Not that he didn't know the secret; he was too tall to fit inside it" (p. 265). Moreover, Houdini went to court to stop two German entertainers from copying his illusion, as they had done.

Houdini's vanishing of an elephant did baffle some magicians (but not all); even so, there's no mystery about its origin. He purchased the rights to it from the inventor Charles Morritt, who had "vanished" a donkey (p. 153). Mr. Epstein also attempts to find something supernatural about the three-second timing of the Metamorphosis (Substitution Trunk) illusion, but it all depends upon when you start counting. I have seen other magicians do the change that fast also—*if* you count from the time when you last "see" the magician's hands on the curtain to the time when it drops to reveal the girl assistant standing on the trunk. Misdirection in the presentation is what allows time for the exchange to take place.

Epstein's conjuring with Bess Houdini's letter to Conan Doyle is also misleading. Her "double-talk" about spiritual aid is comprehensible in the context of her writing to a great admirer of her dead husband, an innocent about the methods of magicians, and an uncritical spiritualist. The passage makes it plausible that she is reassuring him that she will not be "offended by anything you say for him or about him," so she keeps faith with Houdini's naturalism, while tactfully not stamping too hard or rudely on Sir Arthur's pet superstition.

Houdini *was* remarkable as an immigrant, a risk-taker, a showman, and a magician, but it is no tribute to his memory to subvert his own rationalism by specious arguments about the supernatural.

Cushing Strout
Professor of American Studies
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York

Daniel Mark Epstein replies:

The dignity of Milbourne Christopher is ill-served by calling attention to that woolly speculation on the Siberian Van Escape, for it demon-

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strates the embarrassing lengths to which scholars are driven in an effort to resolve the mystery. That Houdini picked the lock on the van is far from likely. The narrow barred window was out of reach of the lock, as on most "paddy wagons." Houdini would have to have been a contortionist, which he was, with the arms of a gigantic baboon, which he had not, in order to pick a lock that he could not have seen if he could have reached it. Milbourne Christopher did not make his reputation as an escape artist.

My point about the Chinese Water Torture Cell illusion is simply that Hardeen could not do the escape even after studying the instructions. Hardeen was a working professional, however tall he was, and the trick was worth good money on the circuit. If Hardeen had had the knowledge *and* the physical resources to manage the escape, it would have been worth his while to rebuild the contraption to fit a colossus. As for the Germans, I have not heard of them. If they had discovered the method of the illusion it would have turned up on the black market in magic tricks that thrives and has ever thrived, and sooner or later some entertainer would have revived it, if he could.

It is true that Houdini purchased the rights to the Vanishing Donkey from Charles Morritt. But need I point out to the Professor of American Studies and Humane Letters at Cornell University that a donkey is not an elephant? Charles Morritt did not vanish a ten-thousand-pound elephant as did Houdini, but a rather meager donkey who might have been hard to see from the balcony if he faced upstage. The trick is just not in the same class as Houdini's; it is closer in scale to making a dog disappear, which I have done myself.

My essay clearly states that the Houdinis' perfection of the Substitution Trunk illusion was the beginning of the magician's own curiosity about the supersensible element of his technique. In action he seems to have experienced moments of unconsciousness in which time and materials lost their accustomed values. This is discussed at some length in Raymund Fitzsimons's book *Death and the Magician*, which is by far the most authoritative and up-to-date work on Houdini's life and career.

The letter of Bess Houdini is ambiguous by any standards, so let Professor Strout make of it what he will. I suspect from the tone of his letter that the Professor is unsettled by the mystery of Houdini's acts, as most of us are. But it is better to be unsettled by a mystery than comforted by irrational solutions.

Clara Schumann's pupils

To the Editors:

Your September issue carries a piece entitled "The pupils of Clara Schumann and the uses of tradition" by Samuel Lipman. It has been drawn to my attention as I am the compiler of the records referred to and the writer of the set's notes. As the "review" aspect of the piece is entirely dismissive, I will request the courtesy of your columns for a considered answer.

What does Lipman mean by "the uses of tradition"? In the body of his article he tells us: "the great pianists of the past have rarely been scholars, have always been supreme egotists, and have invariably made styles, not reflected them." In other words, "the uses of tradition" for him are precisely zero. He is self-confessedly unqualified to understand these records.

From this contradiction flows his entire piece. He cannot perceive, he tells us, the stylistic similarities shared by all the Schumann pupils. These similarities have been clear to every other reviewer whose opinions have so far come to our notice—eight in all.

He confuses rhythmic security with dullness. This may be because the playing on these records represents a style unfamiliar to him. He ignores entirely the remarkable tonal balancing and voice leadings everywhere apparent in these records.

He grossly exaggerates Adelina de Lara's mistakes. Her occasional slips never come anywhere near obscuring the music's proportions. And her rhythmic control—especially in the Brahms Haydn Variations, in which he finds only "a certain weak-kneed sentimentality"—is of the greatest firmness. These are not matters of "taste" or "opinion" but of facts, clear to anyone not violently biased.

Mr. Samuel Lipman has written a bad review in every sense. I question whether he can produce a single responsible critic to agree with any one of his violent remarks. If he cannot, then you,

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Sirs, owe the producers of these important records a fresh and fair review.

Jerrold Northrop Moore
c/o Oxford University Press
Oxford, England

Samuel Lipman replies:

Mr. Jerrold Northrop Moore questions "whether [I] can produce a single responsible critic to agree with any one of [my] violent remarks." I can indeed, and the critic I will now cite is a noted *aficionado* of the same kinds of pianistic traditions of which Mr. Moore has appointed himself a conservator. In *The Great Pianists* (1963), Harold C. Schonberg writes of the very performances (when they were first available on records) Mr. Moore urges upon us:

> Adelina de Lara, another Schumann-lady, might have been a good pianist; but the Clara Schumann Society in the 1950s did her no service by having her record several large-scale Schumann works. De Lara was seventy-eight at the time, and whatever her intentions, she did not have the coordination to put them into practice.

So much for the unanimity of praise to which Mr. Moore points. But I cannot help thinking that in requiring of me that I cite critical authority for my own musical judgment Mr. Moore makes clear that for him, in intellectual matters as in musical ones, nothing worthwhile exists unless it has been properly validated before—in a word, by tradition. So Adelina de Lara's playing takes its value (at least for Mr. Moore) from its association with Clara Schumann; is my judgment then to take *its* value from the precedent of Harold C. Schonberg?

Nonsense, of course. De Lara's playing, like everyone else's on the *Pupils of Clara Schumann* set, must be listened to for itself, for its own musical and pianistic accomplishments. If all this playing doesn't convince without the attribution to Clara Schumann, it can scarcely convince with it. Similarly, my critical verdict on Mr. Moore's compilation must itself be judged in terms of the piano-playing I have attempted to evaluate.

As piano-playing, the work of Adelina de Lara and her peers falls far short of high (or in many cases even professional) artistic achievement. To impute to their work the greatness of the past is, in my opinion, to fall victim to the nostalgia which is already so widespread in performing musical life today. And when nostalgia becomes the criterion of art, the result can only be a barely disguised philistinism.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

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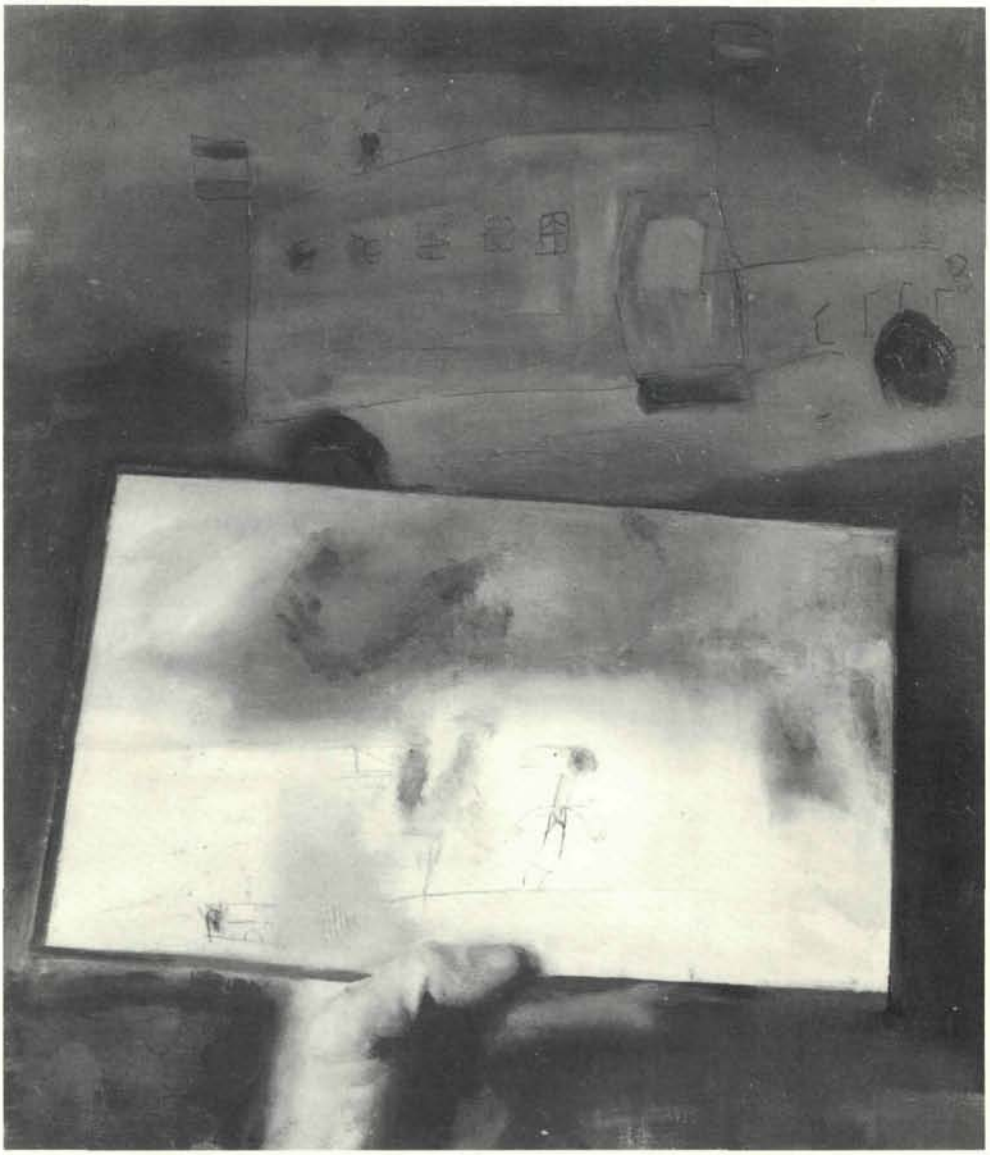

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